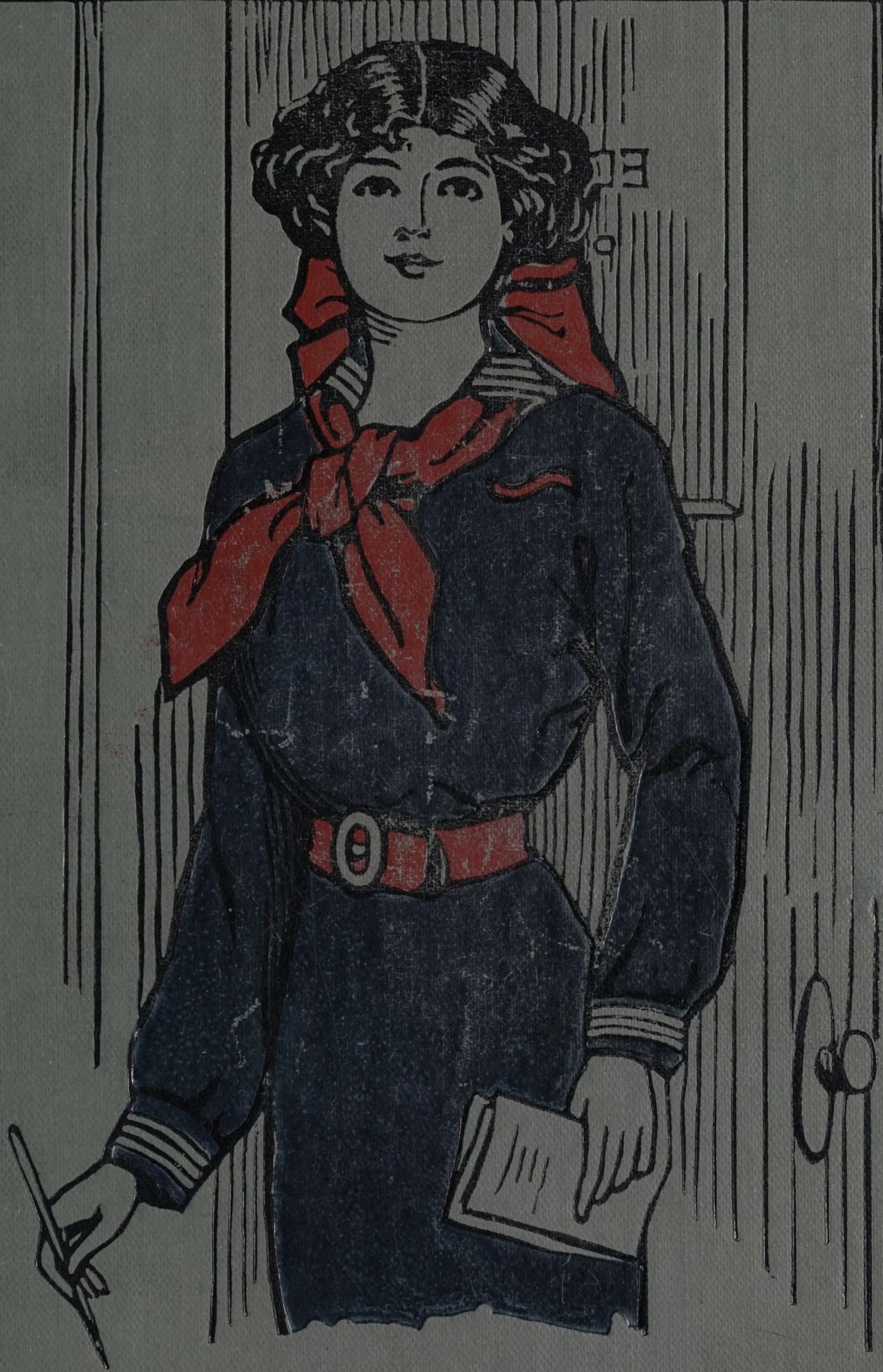


# HESTER'S WAGE-EARNING



JEAN K. BAIRD



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THE TALK WAS NOT TIRESOME TO HESTER NOW. HER EYES WERE  
GLOWING.—*Page 13.*

THE HESTER BOOKS

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# HESTER'S WAGE-EARNING

BY

JEAN K. BAIRD

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and "Hester's Counterpart"

*ILLUSTRATED BY ELIZABETH WITTINGTON*



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# HESTER'S WAGE-EARNING

## CHAPTER I

HESTER'S first year at school had come to a close. She was eager to be home again, but not so much as was her foster-aunt, Debby Alden, who reviewed mentally, while she packed her wardrobe, all that had occurred during the sixteen years since Hester's mother had been killed at the railroad-crossing before the old Alden place and Debby had taken the little child, who had been tossed unhurt from her mother's arms.

For almost sixteen years Hester had been with Debby Alden. She had been a comfort and inspiration. The foster-aunt reviewed all in her mind. She realized how she had developed and broadened her own life through her efforts to rear and educate the motherless child. She was a finer, better woman because Hester

had been left to her. Life had received its inspiration from the child.

During the last year, she had lived in Lockport that she might be near Hester, who was enrolled in school. June had brought with it floods, the like of which had never before been known in the country. The school and city had been flooded. Now the river and creek had gone back to their original beds. School had been closed. Debby was eager to return to her home.

The low-grade roadbed from Lockport home had been washed away. Traffic had been resumed, but the trains dragged their way slowly, while for miles the road was virtually being rebuilt, the length of a rail at a time. The Bald Eagle railroad which tunneled through the mountains into the broader valleys to the west had been high and dry above the flood mark. Debby could go home by this route. It meant, however, traveling over two sides of a triangle to reach Reno, while the river road was the third side.

“It means four hours more to travel and a change of cars at Tyrone,” Debby explained

to Hester, "but it's safe. We are in no need to hurry. We go home by the Bald Eagle Valley."

Hester offered no objections. This way was new to her. She enjoyed any new experience.

At eight o'clock Thursday morning, Debby and Hester entered the station at Castanea. Miss Richards was not returning with them. She had gone north to visit friends as soon as the roads were open to travel.

Debby was anxious to see her old home. Never had she been away so long from it before. Almost ten months had passed since she and Hester had locked the front door, handed the key to Kate Bowerman and walked away with many a backward glance at the closed blinds and general air of being left untenanted.

Sam Logan had promised to plant her garden for her. Sam kept his promises after a fashion; but he believed to-morrow was quite as good as to-day in working value. Debby knew that Sam would be faithful after his fashion and put in the garden when he got

around to it, which would be two weeks later than Debby herself would have had it.

She was not a little concerned about this. By this time there should be plenty of smaller garden truck and the peas should be almost ready to shell.

Her mind was so taken up with these matters that she paid no attention to the other passengers. Hester had tried to keep up a conversation, but, becoming discouraged by her aunt's absent-minded replies, gave up the attempt and began to study the people about her. There was nothing unusual in their looks or attire. She would not have turned for a second look.

Debby and Hester were seated near the middle of the car. After studying the passengers before her, Hester turned her head sidewise and glanced down the aisle.

“A most remarkable likeness,” were the words which fell upon her ear and which were evidently not intended for her hearing. “I noticed it at once, but I was only able to get a side view. But with the full face view, the resemblance is startling.”

Hester sat very still. These fancied resemblances to some one of whom she knew not, gave her a sense of uneasiness. She had the feeling of one who stood alone on a mountain peak knowing that an uncertain step might fling her headlong.

Hester sat very still and listened. Her ears were keen for such matters. Her Aunt Debby, absorbed in dreams of green peas and fresh corn, had not heard the words.

“Did you know Rose?” Another voice asked the question. The first replied, “None knew her better. A dear little woman. She was only twenty when she and Phil were married. A good old-fashioned love affair.”

“How long afterward did this—this—what would you call it?—calamity happen?”

“I do not remember. Something like two years, I think. The little girl was almost a year old. I—”

Hester moved uneasily. Then as though acting without volition, she turned and looked directly into the faces of the speakers.

Both were men near middle age. One was tall, spare of limb and sharp-featured. His

thin lips met in a narrow cruel line. His eyes were gray, cold, steely, penetrating. He was well dressed in a gray business suit. He looked like a professional man or a prosperous merchant. His companion was a fat pudgy creature, with double chin and mild eyes. He was untidy in his appearance and looked particularly bad in comparison with the scrupulously tidy gentleman at his side.

Hester looked directly into their faces. They met her glance, then turned aside and lowered their voices as though afraid that she might hear. There was nothing offensive in their bearing. They were courteous enough not to show that they had observed the surprise and fear in the eyes of the young girl as she turned to look at them.

Hester turned her face to the window. It was an hour yet before they would reach the junction. During that time the girl's eyes were fixed upon the whirling landscape, while her lips kept repeating, "Who is it I look like? I wonder if Aunt Debby knows. She knows more than she will tell me."

She had not lived with Aunt Debby Alden sixteen years without realizing that if Debby kept back any information it was for Hester's happiness. The knowledge, then, would cause unhappiness, Hester reasoned. So her mind moved on and on in a circle, going over the same ground again and again and never reaching a conclusion.

There was a wait of several hours at the junction. Hester knew nothing of the town. It was not large, but gained its importance from being at the junction of several main lines and branches.

After a dinner at the hotel, Debby and Hester walked about town. Even this did not dispose of all the time and they returned to the station to wait until train time. There was but one general waiting-room and ticket office. A small alcove with open windows was used as a newspaper stand.

As Debby and Hester came opposite the entrance, the latter noticed one of the men she had seen in the train. It was the short fat little fellow with untidy clothes. His com-

panion in the train was no longer with him. He was talking now to a little wiry fellow, all skin and bones and sharp eyes.

Hester did not look in their direction as she passed close to them, but she felt that the eyes of the one man were following her closely. There was really nothing in that to cause surprise. She and Aunt Debby were different in looks and yet both unusually attractive. It was little wonder that a stranger's eyes would turn for a second glance toward them.

"Let us sit here, Hester," said Debby as they entered the station. "One can get a breath of fresh air here." She indicated a place by the open window which looked out on the paved terrace which separated the building from the street. Without were a number of benches. Here the greater number of men were gathered.

"I am tired. We walked farther than I thought," said Hester. She sat down where Debby had indicated. There were people coming and going. Several long trains on the main line came in and out. There were all types of humanity, and Hester and Debby

watched them. Suddenly in the moving mass, Debby Alden recognized an acquaintance and hurried away to speak to her, bidding Hester to remain where she was, so that she might be readily found on Debby's return.

Barely had Hester been left alone when her ear again caught the tones which had attracted her attention in the car. The little fat man was sitting just outside the window.

"I came up with Jim Bates this morning," he was saying. "I don't know how we got on an accommodation, but we did. Slow as molasses in January. Train stops every three minutes to shoo some one's chickens off the track."

His companion laughed and the speaker chuckled under his breath as though his little pleasantry were something quite new and original.

"Jim's getting along fine; been coming right up for years. He's got a good head on him and knows what's what. I hain't seen him for years until to-day. I declare, I wouldn't have known him from Adam, but he 'knowed' me the minute his eyes lit on me. 'Cranson, you old

critter,' he says, grabbing my hand, 'where'd you hail from?' "

"Where does he live now?" asked his companion.

"Doing business down the road," was the reply, given in such a way that one might believe that for some reason Jim Bates did not wish to keep his permanent address before the public.

"Jim's kept track of most of the old boys—young sprouts that used to go to school at Bogg's Run. He told me about them all—some's pushing up and some down. I tell you it's mighty strange how things turn out in folks' lives. There's more strange things than was ever put down in story books." He paused an instant and then added, "The workings of Providence are darned strange."

The voice as well as the words and sentiment were strangely incongruous. Hester smiled involuntarily.

"He was telling me about Phil Williams. You remember Phil—Stalky Williams, we used to call him 'cause he was so fat. Well, Phil got married to Rose Walton. You didn't know

Rosie. The Waltons moved in after your folks went west. Nice girl, and about as pretty as you'd see in a day's travel. Dark wavy hair, pink cheeks, eyes big and bright. Nice girl.

"Phil married her. They kept house up in Olympia. They had a little girl. I never saw the child. Indeed, I never saw either Rosie or Phil after they moved up to Olympia. Phil was working for the lumber company and worked his way right up. He got into a deal himself and went down south to look after it."

This was not at all interesting to Hester. She sighed with weariness and would have turned away had not the next words given her a start.

The man had made an impressive pause. Then raising his fat, chubby, dirty finger, he pointed it at his companion and said, "Now, here's what I mean by saying that the workings of Providence are 'darned' mysterious. Phil, he goes south, leaving a wife and little girl a year old. Phil, he falls sick down there and they send for Rose to come down.

"Rose starts as quick as she can get ready.

She always thought a heap of Phil. She starts one morning, taking the baby with her. Now, there were several ways she could reach Phil after she left Olympia and went to the city. She could have come right through this section and she might have taken the eastern road. She didn't tell any one at Olympia which road she took. Mebbe she didn't know about there being several ways she might go, for she was one of those home-bodies not much given to traipsin' over the country. Well, all that folks know was that she started with her baby to find Phil. He lay down there sick, not getting much care, for he had only nigger nurses, and wondering all the while why Rose didn't come or didn't write. It wasn't until he was able to go home that he understood. When he got to Olympia there was his house all closed up and the key handed to a neighbor. It had been that way for something like a month. No wife and no little girl anywhere."

"What had become of them? Didn't they ever show up?"

"No. Phil spent a lot of money looking for them. Of course he knew something had hap-

pened. He put notices in all the papers asking for information, but he never got so much as a word. The hard part was not knowing just which road she took. He couldn't trace her so easily; for as I said before, she might have gone three or four different routes."

"Nothing ever heard of them since. It is surely strange. I cannot understand how a woman and child could disappear in the midst of a civilized set of people and no trace of them ever be found."

The talk now was not tiresome to Hester. Her eyes were glowing and that strange dread which had seized her when Abner Stout had spoken to her in the store was upon her again. It was strange how mothers and children were disappearing. She leaned forward, wholly unconscious of the people about her. Somehow she felt that this story of Rose and her little daughter was meant for herself and that unknown and unremembered mother who lay up in the Alden lot in the old burial ground at home. Even though the fear and dread were strong upon her, a feeling of relief mingled with them. She did not belong to Aunt Debby by

“blood ties” but she did by those of law. She was “legally” Debby Alden’s little girl, and nothing could change that. Whoever her own people were, or whenever they might come for her, they could not take her from her Aunt Debby nor change the name she had learned to love and respect. She was an Alden and she was proud of it.

Although it hurt her to hear the subject discussed, yet she leaned forward and drank in every word of the conversation. The men by a mere turn of the head in her direction could have looked her full in the face. They seemed indifferent not only to her presence but to the passing throng. Of the hundreds who came and lingered for a short time and went their way, Hester alone was interested and heard what was said.

“Strange,” repeated the man slowly. “I wouldn’t have believed such a thing as that could happen. How long ago did you say that this happened?”

“Jim didn’t say exactly. He just sort of generalized. But I know when they moved to

Olympia, the little girl was a year old. If I calculated right, it would be about seventeen years ago. I'm not good on dates. It may be only sixteen. I'd have to reckon back to be exact; but as I say, calculating roughly, it's just about seventeen years ago."

There was a pause. The speaker sighed and adjusted himself more comfortably on the bench. "Strange how things do come about. It was kind of funny how Jim Bates came to tell me all Phil's troubles. I hain't thought of Phil and Rose for years, though we used to be as thick as pie when we went to the Bogg's Run School. I used to see Rose frequent enough before she was married. She was twenty or thereabouts. Well, this morning I was sitting talking to Jim when a woman and girl ups and comes into the train. Now I wasn't thinking no more of Rose Williams than you'd be, and neither was Jim. We were talking business. But when that girl walked down the aisle I just naturally exclaimed, 'Rose Walton,' and didn't Jim Bates do the same trick at the same time. That girl was

just identical with Rose Walton when Rose was a young girl—the time when we had seen her last."

"That does seem strange. I've known resemblances to be startling and yet there was no relationship whatever. Nature sometimes has a little trick of doing just such things. It may be, though, if families were traced back far enough, we'd find that a far-removed common ancestor had reasserted himself after many generations. I've known the thing to happen in my own family." Here the bundle of bones and skin and sharp keen eyes began a long dissertation on some of the peculiar resemblances existing among his own people. His companion, however, had no desire to listen to a long harangue. For some reason, he wished to talk on this one subject. He interrupted the man's talk with, "That all may be, but this wasn't any resemblance of one feature or one trick of moving or talking. It was a counterpart in every way. If I hadn't knowed that eighteen years had passed since I'd talked with Rose Walton, I'd gone right up to that girl there and then and spoke to her and called

her Rose Walton. That resemblance wasn't no mere chance. You know yourself that Jim Bates hain't no man's fool. He was all worked up over it. He didn't know whether he'd write to Phil and tell him about it or whether he'd better keep his mouth shut."

"What good would come of Phil's knowing of this resemblance? It would only excite him unnecessarily."

"It kind of come to me that mebbe she might be the little girl. Strange things—"

"You're talking nonsense. Let the matter rest. By this time Phil has laid their disappearance apart in his life as one of the things beyond comprehension and of which he dare not permit himself to think. Why trouble him at all?"

"He hain't laid it aside. It was only a few weeks ago that he got some kind of a clue. Jim didn't say when or where he got it. It seems that he heard of a woman up here some place being killed by a train. The woman was carrying a child. It was saved, however, and some one took it and took care of it. If I remember rightly, it happened somewhere

right in this vicinity. I don't know that Phil knows the names, but he's working along that line."

"He'd better let the matter rest after so long a time. It will only spoil his life. He should put it aside and think as little of it as he can."

"That hain't Phil's way. Remember it was his little girl. That's what's in his mind all the time. Think how you'd feel yourself if you was in his place." He sighed and shook his head. "She'll be a lucky girl to have such a father. There'll be nothing that he won't get for her—bangles and baubles and motor cars and everything that she'll want. All she needs to do will be to say the word."

Debby Alden, who had been standing with her friend at the end of the waiting-room, engaged in conversation, bade her friend good-by and moved across the room to Hester. The girl saw her coming and moved away from the window that her aunt might not hear the conversation from without.

The little fat man who had been doing the greater part of the talking saw her move. Quickly turning his head, he looked through the

window. Hester had moved away almost out of sight and out of hearing. The man had seemingly been unconscious of the girl's presence, yet when he knew that she was not within hearing, he began another subject of conversation, and forgot about Phil and Rose.

It may have been chance that he did so. It may have been that he knew the girl was hearing every word he said and had talked for her benefit. What the cause or his motive was, was not easily defined. The man was a stranger in that locality.

Hester, being of a guileless nature, thought only that it had chanced so. There could be no reason for a strange man's putting himself to trouble to annoy her with the story.

The gong for the incoming train sounded.

"Come, Hessie, that is our train. I'm very glad. I did not realize how fine it is to be home." She gathered together a few stray packages.

"Neither did I, Aunt Debby. School was lovely, but home is—" She could find no word adequate to express herself. She continued: "It's a good thing to go away. Don't you

think so? We appreciate that dear old place more than ever when we have been away from it for months."

Her eyes and face were alight. The conversation she had overheard had passed from her mind. She was overcome with a desire to be back home. She said no more on the subject of their home-coming. Like Debby, her deepest feelings rarely spent themselves in words.

A crowd was before them making their way into the train. Hester caught a glimpse of the little fat man who had done so much talking. He was pushing his way through the crowd, trying to get aboard before all the seats were taken. His coat pockets were bulging with newspapers as though he had hastily thrust them there when he had heard the train whistle.

Hester's eyes followed him as she and her Aunt Debby stood in the outer edge of the crowd. At last she lost sight of him. At that instant he had gotten into the midst of the passengers who were coming from the train. He was jostled about. The papers fell from

his pockets. Then the crowd lessened and he was able to make his way into the coach.

Hester and Miss Debby moved forward. As they waited to be helped aboard, Hester noticed the paper lying at her feet; she gave it a hurried glance—no more. It was yellow with age. She pushed it aside with her foot. Had she looked closer, she might have learned much that concerned herself and her friends. The paper was one which had dropped from the pocket of the man, Cranson. It was just a year younger than Hester. An advertisement in headlines offered a large reward for a woman named Rosa Williams who had disappeared with a little child.

The paper was yellow, stained, and old. Hester pushed it aside with her foot and entered the car.

## CHAPTER II

THERE was so much to be done within the house and in the garden that Hester had no time to think of the conversation she had overheard. Sam Logan had done his best with the garden. There was plenty of what he called "small garden truck," and the prospects were good for beans, peas, corn and potatoes. The arrangement was not as methodical as it would have been had Debby herself been at home. She had always made use of a system of arrangement which made the general effect of the garden very pleasing. She had the eye of the landscape gardener. She liked the big bushy things to be placed at the back of the garden where they served as a background. Sam, however, had a bed of onions and then peas, followed by early cabbage.

Several years before, such a condition of affairs would have been a sore trial to Debby Alden. For an instant she gave herself up to

such feelings. Then she smiled, "It's really of no importance after all. The peas will grow there as well as close to the fence—perhaps better. It doesn't look so well, but in three months it will all be gone. The arrangement is really of no vital importance and I'll not concern myself about it." Then she turned to Sam Logan who had been showing her about. "Things are farther advanced than I expected to find them. You must have planted early."

Sam nodded knowingly. He was an excellent gardener, an excellent Jack-of-all-trades, but he was dilatory. His rule appeared to be, "never do to-day what you can put off until to-morrow."

"I planted as early as I dared—I didn't want to risk any freezing. I reckon you're surprised to know that your garden and mine were the first hereabouts."

"I certainly am surprised," she said. "You have been generally a little late with yours, Sam."

"Well, it was my own and I calculated I had a right to put it in when I would. I reckon as

it was no one's affairs but mine.'" He paused and stood with his hands in his hip pockets, while his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the early cabbage. He was evidently touched about something. Debby knew the peculiar traits of the man and waited in silence for him to finish his complaint. "That Mrs. Kate Bowerman began twittering early the first of the year about putting in your garden. Meet her when I would, she would say, 'Remember, Sam, the Aldens always have green peas before July. If I was you, I'd not wait until the last of June to hunt up the seed.' That's the way she was always twitting me. I thought I'd let her see for once that I knew as much about farming as any Bowerman.'" He paused, his eyes yet on the heads of cabbage which were fully developed. Then he looked up at Debby Alden. "Hain't seen the Bowerman garden yet, have you, Miss Alden?"

"No, I have not. I came home but yesterday, as you know, Sam, and I've had little time to go anywhere. I presume it is fine."

"Fine!" There was a world of contempt in his voice. "Just go and look at their cabbage.

It will do you good, but take your specs along. You'll need them to see anything that's there, I can tell you."

Debby laughed. Sam had evidently received his share of satisfaction in having Miss Debby's garden far in advance of her neighbor. It was the first time the man had shown any signs of ambition in any of its phases.

"Kate's sarcasm has done a good turn this time," said Debby to herself.

Debby felt somewhat ashamed of the inside of the house. She had left everything in order when she had gone away in the fall. Now, there was dust everywhere. Spiders had festooned the windows with their webs and the dust and rain had marked the windows. Debby could not wholly put aside the traditions of her inheritance and training. She had been reared with the idea that certain months are propitious for certain kinds of housework and that to make a general mix-up of time and work was little less than criminal. Cleaning windows and hanging curtains in July was not according to the regular order, but it was there to be done, and Debby and Hester arose early

and worked late to put the house into its accustomed order.

The old-fashioned bric-a-brac and ornaments which had decorated the mantel and walls of the living-room had been taken down and packed away when Debby had gone away the fall before. When the house had been thoroughly swept, aired, and dusted, Debby requested Hester to bring out these articles from the closet and put them to rights.

Hester had all the instincts of a home-maker. She enjoyed arranging a room and trying to get the best effect from the different articles of furniture. She accepted her aunt's suggestion and began at once while Aunt Debby prepared dinner. In the closet there was a small pasteboard box tied up securely with a bit of twine. Hester opened this. There was a motley array of trifles, of no value whatever, to Hester's mind. Among them were some old-fashioned photographs. Hester seized upon them eagerly. She had learned a trick of arranging photographs while at school. Almost every sitting-room had had shelves and

walls filled with photographs. Hester worked slowly; first arranging, stepping back to see the general effect, and then changing it all.

At last she was satisfied. Aldens of all ages appeared on the broad low mantelpiece. Hester was surveying it with an air of pride when Debby came in to call her to dinner.

“Dear me, Hester, what are you up to now?” she asked. There was a touch of amusement in her voice. Whatever Hester did or might do was pleasing in the elder woman’s eyes.

“Doesn’t it look pretty, Aunt Debby? I found them all in a box, away back in the closet. Some of them must have been taken a long time ago, if one can judge from the dress. Look at this woman with curls over her shoulders and hoop-skirts. Who was she, Aunt Debby?”

“That’s old Aunt Peggy Ramage. She was Grandmother Alden’s sister. I remember her well. She’s been dead for years.”

“And this one, Aunt Debby?”

Debby told the name and to which branch of the family the original belonged. There was

a long line of them and Hester would not let one go without hearing something of his history.

"We must have been a big family, Aunt Debby. I wish we were a big family now, don't you? Haven't you any cousins or nieces anywhere? Somehow it doesn't seem just respectable to be by yourself and not have near relatives. We should have more of a family, Aunt Debby."

Debby smiled gently. She liked such sentiment from Hester. To Debby's mind, there was something radically wrong with people without family connection. She had inherited a pride of family and birth. The Aldens kept trace of their blood out to the third and fourth branch. There was always a sense of duty and obligation to one another wherever there was a bit of Alden. Hester showed the same inherent qualities, and Debby Alden was proud of this.

"There's none of our direct family here, Hester," she said. "I am the only one of my own family. My uncles and aunts with their children and grandchildren settled over in the

other valley. My great-grandfather left there and bought this place."

"And he built this house," cried Hester. "That was one hundred years ago. There was no railroad and the nails and glass were hauled by ox-teams; the shingles were hand-drawn. I remember it all."

She had never wearied when a little child of hearing Debby tell stories of the days of the earlier settlers which the narrator had had at first hand from her grandfather.

Hester turned to the picture. Pushing one aside, she disclosed a picture of a young man with very pink cheeks and blue eyes, taken when photographers believed in adding a touch of nature. "Who's this, Auntie?"

Debby gave a sudden start. "That? That's Jim Baker. He used to go to school down in the hollow. No, he isn't any connection."

Hester looked up into Debby Alden's face. The girl was conscious of something not quite natural in the woman's voice and manner. Miss Debby turned her head aside. "Come to dinner, Hessie. I've made a little turnover for

you. You were always the greatest baby about turnovers and tarts. You always cared more for them than the finest pie I could bake."

"I do yet. I'll never get over being a baby about turnovers, Aunt Debby." Putting her arm about Debby's waist she went out to dinner. Debby Alden had grown more punctilious of late years in regard to conventions and customs. She and Hester observed all the niceties even when alone. There had been a time when Debby Alden wore a kitchen apron to the dining-table. That day had passed. She had learned the great philosophy of paying to one's own presence the same respect that one would pay to the presence of an honored guest.

"When the dinner work is finished, Aunt Debby, I think I shall walk over to see Jane and Orpha. I do not believe they know I am home, or else they would have come to see me."

"Do just as you wish," said Debby. "Mary Bowerman knows that you are here. She saw us passing. It is strange that she has not slipped in for a few moments to see you."

"Oh, she's different," said Hester. She said no more.

As though Hester's thought bore with it conjuring power, Orpha, Jane, Ralph, and Mary appeared early in the afternoon. The day was extremely warm—too warm to sit indoors—and the old-fashioned Alden home had no covered porches, only stoops upon which the mid-summer sun beat down without mercy.

"Let us sit under the apple-tree," said Hester. "There's one bench there now." She began piling her arms with cushions. Ralph, laughing, relieved her.

"But you can't carry them all," she cried.

"Indeed, Ralphie can," cried Jane. "He's very strong. What does he think about a few cushions!"

Ralph laughed at the sisterly pride and strode on out into the yard with the girls following. The girls made themselves comfortable with the cushions. Ralph lay down on the grass, his elbows propped on the ground while his upturned palm supported his chin.

"Tell us about school," said Jane. "I'm just dying to hear about a girls' school. I've

kept Ralph busy since he came home telling me all the boys did."

"I haven't told you half," said Ralph. "I don't want to scare you to death."

"Do you like to hear them tell about it?" said Orpha. "Isn't that funny?"

Mary Bowerman said nothing.

"Tell me first about high school," said Hester. "Were the examinations as hard as ever? Did Professor Sanderson act as disagreeably as ever?"

"Wait a minute before you answer," cried Ralph. He began to slap his pockets and dive into every corner of his coat.

"Hornet?" asked Jane.

"Bee?" cried Hester.

"He acts more as though he had gone suddenly crazy," said Mary Bowerman.

"It's a letter," said Ralph, bringing it forth.

"I stopped for the mail and Mr. Fillman suggested that I bring this to Miss Debby, and I almost forgot it." He was on his feet, in the house and back again almost in an instant. All the while Jane's admiring eyes followed him.

"Now," said Ralph, resuming his former position, "I'm ready for the confab. Woe is me when you girls begin to talk. What evil fate induced me to come?"

"Don't look at me," said Mary. "I'm no evil fate. I did not induce you to come. You came in spite of me." She laughed saucily. In this mood she was really likable. She could be witty. She was bright beyond the average girl. As long as she refrained from sarcasm, she was a companion worth while.

"You dragged me here," said Ralph. "I didn't want to come, but you girls made me."

"Isn't that like all the excuses boys make?" asked Hester. "Do you remember in the grammar grade whenever Mr. Rank got after any of the boys they'd cry, 'I didn't want to but—some one—made me'?"

The girls laughed and cried in chorus, "'I didn't intend to laugh out loud, but Lewis Jones, he made me.'"

Then they laughed again. This had been one of the experiences in the grammar school four years before. Everything that happened was blamed on poor Lewis Jones.

"You were asking about the examinations," said Jane. "They were something awful. After we were given one in Cicero, I didn't sleep for weeks thinking of it. It was worse than all the examinations of all the years before rolled into one. Orpha cried her eyes out over the geometry."

Ralph held up a warning finger. "Hyperbole, Jane," he said. Jane's cheeks dimpled. Smiles bubbled over in lips and eyes. She, in turn, raised a finger at her brother and said soberly, "Fibs, Ralphie."

They laughed again. How very easy it was to laugh when they were all together again after being separated for ten months. Even Mary was so happy that she was humorous without being sharp.

"It's all the way you look at it," she said. "In classical literature, any statement exaggerated far beyond the truth is hyperbole; in ordinary life, it's just a common fib."

They began again on school questions and for a half hour no other subject intruded itself. Ralph took little part in the talk except to throw in a teasing word now and then. While

Hester was dilating verbally upon the horrors of the flood, Orpha's slow but thorough look allowed no item of her friend's appearance to escape notice.

"You've changed the way you do your hair," she interrupted. "Is that something new?"

"That's just what I was going to ask you," said Jane. "How do the Seminary girls do their hair?"

Ralph groaned. "I thought for once I was going to escape. I was thinking for the last five minutes that here at last was a set of girls who could talk without bringing in clothes or styles. But I see I am mistaken. Oh, that some way of escape were opened to me!"

"Out there's the road," said Mary, nodding toward the gate.

"It may stay there," said Ralph, ignoring the suggestion in her words; "I've no intention of bringing it in, even to please you girls. The proper place for a road, anyhow, is outside."

"If you are so anxious to escape, you might take it," retorted Mary.

"I will not. It belongs to the State. Why should I take it? I'm no politician."

"Don't pay any attention to him, Mary," said Jane. "Ignoring him is the only way to manage him. When he gets these brilliant spells at home we just pretend that we don't hear a word he says. He stops talking then."

"Oh, I do, my lady. I shall remember. Hereafter I shall continue to talk."

The girls acted on Jane's suggestion. They ignored the presence of the young man. They did not look in his direction and paid no attention to the bunches of clover which came their way.

"They wore their hair all sorts of ways," began Hester.

"— cut bias with a chignon and a barrette," said Ralph.

Hester continued, "Erma Thomas had beautiful light hair—"

"Peroxide. Buy it at any drug store," said Ralph.

"She always braided hers and then coiled it around her head. It was fluffy in front and—"

"And corrugated in the back, interspersed with small sausage links known as—"

He could not finish. Jane was upon him with a cushion in her hand. The other girls flew to her rescue. The cushion came down upon him with all the force that the girls could command.

"Quarter—quarter," he cried at last. When the enemy had withdrawn, he added, "Hereafter, the girls may wear their hair as they please. They'll get no advice or suggestions from me. They'll regret it." He looked about in mock sadness. Then suddenly he stiffened up his shoulders and assumed an air of importance as he continued, "But, why should I complain? It is the way of the world. All great reformers have been treated as I have been—buffeted, pounded—"

"Even burned at the stake," said Mary in stage whispers. "How would you like being burned at the stake?"

"Rare," said Ralph in sepulchral tone. Then they laughed again. Mary turned to Jane. "Some day, Jane, I wish you would lock Ralphie up in the basement or attic, or chain

him. I don't care how you do it, only so you can keep him there. Then come for me and we'll get Hester to tell us about the styles of hairdressing."

"I'll do it," said Jane. She turned to her brother with her rarest, sweetest smile, "Ralphie, dear, some day you remind me of it—"

There was the whistle of an incoming train heard. "There," exclaimed Mary, "it is five o'clock. We have spent the afternoon talking nonsense. It's all Ralph's fault. If he had not been here—" She paused to look up at him. Her unfinished sentence suggested more than words would have done, the deep and important subjects they would have discussed if they had not been kept from it by the presence of a boy.

"We'd been discussing deep questions," said Hester in mock seriousness. "We'd been airing our opinions on all the great problems of the day."

"By the shades of Plato, hear them talk," exclaimed Ralph. "If I hadn't been here you girls would have been discussing me and all

the other boys in town. I know. Haven't I a sister?"

"That's what we meant," said Mary in assumed meekness. "Are you not one of the great problems of the day?"

"You might as well give up, Ralph," exclaimed Hester. "Mary is on her high horse to-day and when she is so, no one can keep pace with her."

"I shall take my brother home where his worth is appreciated," said Jane. "Come, Ralphie." She held out her hand for Ralph to help her up.

While all this banter had been going on, Orpha had sat quiet. She did not grasp the humor or the meaning. She took it for granted that it all must be very funny, for the girls had laughed. Therefore she also laughed.

"It is late," said Mary, arising. "The road looks hot and dusty. Let us go home through the woods and over the hill. We'll be in the shade. It will take us very little longer."

"I'm willing," said Jane. "Hester, come and walk with us to the top of the hill."

The way over the hill lay through the or-

chard and across a little run where stepping-stones served as a bridge. Beyond lay a series of little clumps or hills as though there were pieces fallen from the great mountains which surrounded the valley. There was a growth of scrawny timber. The trees seemed old enough in years, but had never attained much height. There were several acres of such land. It belonged to Debby Alden and marked the western boundary of her homestead. It was worthless for agricultural purposes. There was not enough timber to warrant a lumber job. It served as a wood place for Debby. Each fall and spring Sam Logan cut enough timber for her use and enough for himself to pay for the cutting he had done for Debby. That was all the timber-lot was worth, unless in the future the town should grow and the plot be laid out in town lots. Debby had once dreamed of disposing of it in this way, but the town had views of its own and stretched out in the other direction.

They came down through the orchard to the brook. Ralph helped them over, threatening to let them fall in. They shrieked in terror,

although the brook would not have come to the tops of the low shoes they were wearing, and they had hundreds of times jumped from stone to stone without assistance.

When they reached the top of the hill by way of a narrow footpath, Mary, who was in advance, stopped. "Look near the root of that tree," she said, "some one has dug a great hole there."

"What is it?" the girls exclaimed.

"It looks like a place for buried treasures," said Mary. "It may be the end of the rainbow where the pots of gold lie buried." She stepped aside. "You go and examine it, Ralph. I am not afraid, but if it's a treasure, I want you to have the joy of finding it."

Ralph gave a glance at the excavation. "That's nothing at all," he said. "That is nothing worth while. Since I've come home, I've found them by the score." He had pushed the bushes aside and was looking into a hole fully six feet deep. "They should be a little careful, though, and fill up after they have dug. Some one might easily fall in there and get hurt."

"Who are 'they' and what are they digging for?" asked Hester. "Remember, I have been away from these 'diggings' for ten months. I have lost track of a great deal."

"Didn't the girls write you any news?" asked Ralph.

"Yes, but it was all about the fashions and that important problem 'young men.' "

"I filled page after page about you, a sort of commentary on your comings and shortcomings," said Mary. "There was much of the latter."

"You had a good subject to work on," laughed Ralph. Then he turned to Hester with an explanation. "Over on Bailey's Ridge they have discovered a surface coal—that is, it lies only a short distance below the surface. It's a cross between hard and soft coal. Since that, every one has become more or less excited. There were geologists and prospectors up here last spring. They went digging about everywhere, and had tons of earth to examine before they went home. I suppose they came up here to see about these hills. If they found coal in quantities it would

make a great difference to many people."

"How?" asked Jane.

"Give them more money than they could spend. There's millions in royalties on coal."

Hester peered down the hole. "I'll remember you all when we get our royalties," she said, "or if you do not want to wait, help yourself to coal."

"There'll be no coal here," said Ralph. "I looked at the soil on Bailey's hill and it differs wholly from this. Geology will show that much. Bailey's is little over two miles from here, yet it lies in a wholly different geological region. There'll be no coal here. Look at the soil." He had reached down and drawn up a handful of earth. The late rains had filled the hole and the water had been slowly absorbed. The handful which Ralph brought up for their examination was pale yellow, clayey. He could mold it in his hands like a piece of putty.

"No coal or signs of it. Soil like this is not good for agriculture. You couldn't have a garden here if you'd give up your time to it.

The whole under-stratum is like that. There isn't six inches of soil on top. No wonder the trees don't grow here. They can't get more than a foothold."

He stood rolling the handful of clay. At last he succeeded in making several marbles from it. He handed one to each girl. "Here's a souvenir of the most profitable afternoon you ever spent," he said; "when you heard a practical illustrated lecture on geology."

Hester walked with her friends to the top of the hill and there left them. She crossed the brook without help, and went down through the orchard and into the living-room. She was pleased with the work she had done there. Now, she surveyed the decorations with a feeling of pride. There was nothing at all beautiful about it, but Hester was a schoolgirl and she had arranged the pictures after schoolgirl fashion.

The picture of the pink-cheeked boy was gone. She noticed that the instant she entered the room. She looked about to be sure that it had not fallen or slipped back of the others. She had given it a prominent place on the man-



"I'LL REMEMBER YOU ALL WHEN WE GET OUR ROYALTIES."—Page 43.



tel, for there was something pleasing to her in the bright boyish face.

She went up to her Aunt Debby's room to ask her if she had taken Jim Baker's picture away. She found her Aunt Debby at her writing-desk.

"Come in, Hessie," she said. "I was writing but a note, and it is finished. Ralph brought me a letter from Conrad and Westerleigh. You know who they are. They have an office over in Mill Street."

"Lawyers, Aunt Debby? Yes, I've seen their office."

"They have asked me to call at my earliest convenience on a matter of business. I presume it is something about gas or oil shares. They have that in charge. Sam Bowerman told me that the men were working hard to get a company floating. I am afraid they will waste their time with me. I have no ready money to invest and even if I had I am quite convinced that I should not trust it to Conrad and Westerleigh."

"Are they dishonest, Aunt Debby?"

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"Are they dishonest, Aunt Debby?"

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ply. It may be a little too strong. They have the reputation of catering to that element whose sense of right and wrong is not normally developed. I would not like to say that they are dishonest. It is simply that they do not always see matters from the same standpoint as some of us."

"Will you go to see them, Aunt Debby?"

"I think so, Hessie. I have business in town to-morrow afternoon, and I can attend to it at the same time. I can not go until late in the afternoon." She smiled at Hester's eager look. She understood what it implied and shook her head slowly in negation.

"No, you cannot come with me. I intend letting you stay at home to keep house and have a lunch for me when I return. I may not be home before six o'clock."

"May I cook what I wish?" asked Hester.

Her Aunt Debby smiled in affirmation of the request.

"You may, at least, try to cook what you wish."

"I promised Helen Loraine that she and I would do all the cooking when she came to see

me this summer. She is not allowed to interfere with their chef; and she's just dying to learn how to make an angel food, and real old-fashioned flap-jacks such as she read about once in a book."

## CHAPTER III

THE afternoon was far advanced when Miss Debby set forth for town to attend to a number of little business affairs there. Hester went with her to the gate and stood looking after her until she had disappeared from sight.

Debby Alden was worth looking at. She wore a simple white shirt-waist suit of heavy linen. It was perfection in the way of making and laundry work. There were no furbelows of any kind. Her linen collar, which was hand-embroidered, was fastened with a cameo pin which had been her Grandmother Palmer's. A simply trimmed straw turban, white wash-gloves, and a white linen parasol completed her toilet. Her gloves had been put on before she left the house. She was watching herself closely for Hester's sake. She did not wish the girl to be careless of trifles. After all, it was in these trifles that the marks of a woman's culture and breeding were shown.

When Miss Debby could no longer be seen, Hester went into the house and set about the preparation of the evening meal. Debby had said "lunch," but Hester intended having something worthy the name of dinner. Her cooking was mostly theoretical. She had helped her Aunt Debby, but had never taken the responsibility of preparing a meal alone. There were cook-books, ancient and modern, on the pantry shelves. Taking down the one with the most attractive cover, Hester began making out a menu.

"I shall have cream tomato soup," she said. "That does not look difficult, and canned tomatoes will do as well as others. That will be the first course." She deliberated some time. The more elaborate menus embraced a meat course with vegetables and a salad course separate.

"There's cold roast beef from yesterday's dinner," she ran over the available articles in the larder while she sat on a footstool by the window with the big book on her lap and a tablet and pencil ready for notes on the windowsill.

"I can warm up the gravy. For vegetables, I'll have mashed potatoes and creamed corn. There, the second course is off my mind." The matter of a salad was a little more difficult. She could reach no conclusion in regard to it. Tomato was tabooed because of the soup; potato salad could not be thought of because of that vegetable's appearing with the meat course. The other recipes called for meats or fish, ingredients which could not be prepared on short notice.

There was canned salmon in the house, but neither she nor Aunt Debby really cared for salmon. It was kept in the store-closet for what Aunt Debby called an emergency meal.

"It is worse than solid geometry," Hester concluded. She would have managed it some way, for she was not one to give up, had not the vigorous ringing of the hall bell brought her to her feet. This meant something in the Alden home. Ragmen and peddlers came to the kitchen door. Friends who came in for a friendly chat came by way of the great double door of the living-room, where an iron knocker

hung. Few came or went by way of the great wide hall with its rambling stairway.

“Strangers,” was Hester’s first thought. Laying aside her gingham work-apron, she answered the summons as quickly as possible, yet not before a second vigorous ringing resounded through the house. Surely some one of determination, purpose, and physical strength was pulling the bell.

Hester opened the door. Before she had an opportunity for any form of salutation a question was almost hurled in her face.

“Miss Debby Alden lives here? Don’t she?”

“Yes, she does,” said Hester. She hesitated about asking the women to enter. They did not seem to be the kind that Debby Alden would wish to enter her home with the mistress absent. One woman was of middle age, portly in figure and loud in dress. Her hair, which was an elaborate construction of puffs and curls, was evidently bleached. Her hat was almost too large to admit her entrance through a single door. It was laden with plumes, and a veil swept over her shoulders. Her dress was of white and purple figured silk. She wore it so

tight that a deep breath might have caused it to part at the seams. Her gloves were noticeably soiled, and the lace at her throat might have been improved by an introduction to soap and water.

Her companion was a young woman, or rather, girl. She, too, was dressed in the extreme of fashion, although with her youthful face and slender figure the lack of taste was not so marked.

“Yes, Miss Alden lives here,” said Hester. Then she added, “She is not at home at present. She will not be here until six o’clock.”

“I know that,” said the woman. “We’ll just come in anyhow and look about.” She swept into the house, almost pushing Hester from her path. The door into the parlor with its horsehair furniture and steel engravings was closed, but the door of the great living-room stood open. Into this the woman swept, and her daughter followed.

Hester was annoyed. For an instant, she was tempted to ask them to withdraw, but she reconsidered in time and, without a word, followed them into the living-room.

"This is a nice, cheery room," cried the woman. "I can breathe here. After those miserable little holes of flats—" She stopped suddenly when Hester appeared. The girl whom the woman had addressed as Deborah had walked to the mantelpiece and was looking over the pictures. There was an air of assumption and boldness about her that was anything but pleasant.

The elder woman moved about the room, examining every article in it as though something might escape her.

"Is this the dining-room?" she asked, going up to the door which was closed. She did not wait for an answer but opened the door and looked into the room. The table was set. The old-fashioned silver service was resplendent. Grandmother Alden's china with gold bands filled the corner cupboard. Debby always used a quaint old-fashioned blue and white service which was on the table.

"Deborah, do come here," cried the woman. "Did you ever see anything so beautiful and quaint?" The girl followed. The two commented on everything in the room.

"What an old-fashioned ingrain carpet," said the girl contentedly. "It looks as though it had come from the ark."

"That can be easily changed," said her mother. "Don't let a piece of carpet put you out of sorts." She seemed afraid that her daughter might make a show of temper. While the mother was stronger and larger, and had the appearance of being the aggressive one, it was the daughter whose will was supreme and whose slightest caprice was catered to.

"Nothing will satisfy me but the house," exclaimed the woman. "I don't wonder that Ezra talked so much about it. He'd be mighty glad to know that you were here at last, Deborah. The house and you were the two things in the world that he set store by."

"Yes," said the girl. It was a word merely as it fell from her lips. There was neither affection nor interest. The older woman looked at her sharply, then turned and walked to the window. Here she stood for some minutes with her handkerchief applied to her eyes. Her shoulders moved convulsively. Yet, when she

turned to Hester a few minutes later, there was not a sign of a tear in her eyes.

"I suppose this leads upstairs," cried the woman, starting toward the door which opened upon the rear staircase. "Oh, these dear old houses! What loves of places they are! Think of having two sets of stairs. Why, in the city, they'd build an entire flat on the same space that's wasted in that front hall."

She had started toward the door, but for once Hester was equal to the occasion. Quick as a flash she turned the key and removed it and stood facing the woman. "You cannot open that door," she said with decision. "I cannot understand why you have taken the liberty of entering this house and acting as you have. It must end here. You can go no farther. I should not have permitted your going as far as this."

Hester's spirit had reasserted itself. She had been so taken by surprise by the unusual proceedings that she had lost her bearings for a time. She had regained them now and would be master of the situation.

"You permit it?" exclaimed the woman. For an instant, she had lost control of herself. Hester was conscious that the voice of the stranger was uncultivated, crude, and harsh. "You permit it? And who are you? I want you to understand right here that I'm the one, and not you, who has the right to permit or not permit what's going on in this house."

"Don't get excited, Mother," said the girl. "What difference does it make what she says?"

"It makes a great deal of difference whether or not I'll allow myself to be ordered about by a mere upstart."

"But, Mother, do be careful. You know how you're apt to say too much." The girl was anxious. She had evidently had some experience with her mother's hasty speech and leisurely repentance. Her words, however, served only to make the woman more decided.

"Just keep a quiet tongue yourself, Deborah. It hain't your place to tell me what to do or what not to do. What's the world coming to anyhow if a mother cannot express her opinion without having her child fly up at her."

There had been no so-called "flying up" on



"YOU CAN GO NO FARTHER. I SHOULD NOT HAVE PERMITTED YOUR GOING AS FAR AS THIS."—*Page 55.*



the part of the girl. She might have declared it so. Words would have been wasted. The only thing to do was to let the woman say all she would and to exhaust her temper and energy in the effort. The girl turned away and began to examine the china upon the table. Her eyes fell wistfully upon the old-fashioned silver service, and wandered about the room as though attracted and influenced by the sense of home that was everywhere in evidence.

Hester Alden caught that wistful homesick look. She was unconsciously touched by it. Her heart went out in sympathy for the girl. She knew not why, but she felt sorry. "All over sorry," as she had been wont to say when she was a child.

Little time was given, however, for her to indulge in such worthy feeling. The woman was not to be turned aside. She came directly before Hester, stamped her foot and would have taken the key, had not Hester put her hands back of her. Hester looked directly at her. She was not afraid. She determined that the stranger should not go upstairs, and she would see to it that this did not happen. Hes-

ter was not afraid, but she wished that her Aunt Debby would come.

The woman's flow of language had not ceased for an instant. She faced Hester, toward whom she now directed her words. "You will not permit me! Of all the bold things for a person in your position to say to me. Do you know who I am? No, you don't, but I know you well enough and you'll know me later—know me too well, maybe. The idea of a little beggar that Debby Alden picked up on the public road, standing before me and telling me that she'll not permit me to go through what's my own."

Hester flinched under these words, but she did not move or attempt to reply. With her back to the door, she faced the window which looked out on the country road. While the woman was delivering her harangue, Sam Bowerman came down the road. Sam was a deliberate creature, who did not believe in doing in one minute what might reasonably be dragged through two. Fortunately for Hester Alden, Sam Bowerman was walking slowly, whittling a stick as he went.

Hester did not stop to think. The instant

her eyes fell upon Sam, she hurried across the room, flung open the door and cried, "Mr. Bowerman, Mr. Bowerman, please come quick."

Sam paused. Then when he had caught the import of her words, nodded affirmatively and moved in through the gate. He came, but he did not come quickly.

The strange woman ceased her harangue when Hester called. When Sam Bowerman appeared, however, she had assumed her bold, aggressive look. She straightened herself up and put on a look of defiance as Sam entered the room.

"Now, you see what you've done, Mother," said the girl. Again Hester's heart went out to her.

"Well, Hester, what's doing and what do you want of me?" asked Sam.

"I wish you'd ask these people to leave," said Hester. "I don't know them—not even their names and they've come in and have almost taken possession and Aunt Debby is not here."

"I'll—" began the woman; but her daughter touched her arm. "Come, Mother, we might as

well go. What's to be gained by staying?" Sam looked over the guests from head to foot. His calm deliberation was more effective now than haste or excitement.

"Well, that's a pretty kettle-of-fish," he said to Hester, and then turning to the woman, he said, "If I was you, I'd go home now and call sometime again when Debby herself is home."

"I've as much right here as Debby—" began the woman.

"That may be; it may be," said Sam; "I won't argue the question, but until it's settled straight and clear before the courts and all, I'd stay off the premises unless I'd been invited to enter. There's no use of your being brought up for trespass, you know. Just use a little common sense and tact and you'll save yourself time and money."

There was wisdom in his words which appealed to the woman. Sam had not been aggressive. He had spoken to the woman as though his interest and good wishes were for her. She was willing to do as he suggested, for she was impressed with the idea that in express-

ing himself he had considered her rather than Hester.

"Just as you say, sir," said the woman. She moved toward the door. Her silks rustled as she moved and her veil floated about her shoulders. "I shall go as you say, but I'll come again and when I come, I come to stay."

"That may all be. It may all be. I hain't one to argue the question," he said. He opened the door. The daughter went out quickly as though eager to be gone. The mother moved slowly in order to maintain her standing and to give the impression that she went from choice and not by invitation.

The daughter waited at the turn of the walk. She addressed her mother earnestly and almost vehemently. Her words were nervous and hurried. Her voice reached Hester and Sam Bowerman, who stood within the door, but the only words distinguished were, "Rather give it all up than to go through such a thing again."

"How did you manage it so nicely?" cried Hester, turning to her companion. "The woman was angry, very angry just before you

came in, but she went off as quiet as a lamb. I was afraid you'd be compelled to put her out by force."

"No use attempting any such move with an angry person. There's no good arguing. It only makes her madder than ever. The best way is just agree with them, and then they'll turn around and do the other thing."

Sam had learned his wisdom in a school of experience. He knew much of the ways of a quick-tempered, sarcastic woman.

"You spoke as though you knew her," said Hester. "Who is she and what possessed her to come here and act as she did?"

"There's no telling. I never set eyes on her before. I think she's just a little touched, as they say. She may be one of those who take notions. I would not worry about it. I'm going on now. I'll wait, though, till you lock up the front of the house. You'll be fussy a bit over this. Just turn the kitchen key and walk over a bit and talk to Mary."

"I believe I will," said Hester. She was wrought up over the affair more than she would confess to any one. She knew she would be

afraid to be in the house alone. She knew also that she would have a good cry the instant Sam Bowerman's back was turned.

She locked the door and walked down to the gate with him. Here she paused and said, "I've changed my mind. I'll not go any farther. Aunt Debby will expect me to be here when she comes home. What if those people should come back and, finding no one at home, go through the house?"

"There's no danger," said Sam; "you'd better walk along and talk a little while with Mary."

"No, I feel as though I should stay here. I'll not go back into the house alone," she added quickly. "I'd see that woman with her bleached hair everywhere. I'll sit under the apple-tree and wait until Aunt Debby comes home."

Sam, realizing that Hester was much wrought up over the experience of the afternoon, did what he could to persuade her to come with him and visit with Mary, but Hester was firm. She went to the bench under the shade of the apple-tree and waited for Debby Alden to appear. As

she waited, she reviewed the events of the last few days.

"I wonder if any other girl ever had such times as I? I've been as happy with Aunt Debby as a girl could be. She's much better and kinder than many a mother. I've been happy and had loads and loads of good times, yet there's been some mighty strange things in my life which have never been in the lives of other girls. I wonder why?"

She did wonder and question. Other girls lived very much alike, while she had much that was strange, even romantic in her life. She smiled at last and exclaimed aloud, "I wonder if that's the reason?" There had come to her in the midst of her reverie something that Doctor Weldon had said the year before when she had given a lecture on the famous folk in literature. It had only been through a wide and varied experience, by rebuffs and sorrows of their own, that these men and women had been able to understand and sympathize with the sufferings of others. They had become great through the things they had suffered.

"They who sing of the mountain-tops must

have one time breathed that air," Doctor Weldon had said, and the thought came to Hester now. Perhaps she was to be one of these "world singers." The thought pleased her for a time. She forgot her guests of the afternoon and the lunch which should have been prepared and sat dreaming of what she might be.

She laughed at last and came back to the present. "How very silly," she said aloud, "to sit and think of things which may never happen. It's very, very silly, and I will not be so foolish as to do that again."

At this juncture, she caught a glimpse of her Aunt Debby and at once hurried to meet her.

"I've had a very strange experience," she began. "It was the strangest, most romantic affair—"

"Yes, I know all about it," said Debby Alden with great indifference. "I passed the woman and her daughter as I was returning, and Sam Bowerman came out to his gate to tell me. He said two strange women had come to see you and had grown quite enthusiastic over a quaint house which had almost a century to its credit. It is odd how some people do get worked

up about things, just because the things are old."

This was seeing matters in a wholly different light. Miss Debby's view of the case was so unexpected by Hester that she could only look. She had lost the power of expression for a few moments.

They turned into the gate and walked to the door without saying a word. Had Hester Alden not been so engrossed with her own experiences and emotions, she would have observed this unusual quiet on the part of Miss Debby.

When they came to the door, Debby Alden forced herself to smile and say brightly, "I hope you have an excellent lunch, Hester, both in quality and quantity. My walk has given me an appetite."

"Oh," exclaimed Hester. She had forgotten the evening meal. She leaned against the frame of the door. She actually felt weak.

"I did intend having a five-course dinner," she began apologetically. "I had the recipe ready for cream tomato soup and a salad and a light egg sponge cake."

"You must have hurried to prepare so much.

You must be tired, too. Five-course dinners are quite a problem even to an experienced cook. Why did you prepare so much, Hester?"

"I didn't prepare that. I planned to have it; but my head was completely turned by these visitors. I haven't anything ready and I had made plans for the loveliest dinner."

"I am afraid my appetite as it is now cannot be satisfied by plans alone," said Debby, as she entered the living-room and laid aside her wraps.

"I will prepare it at once," cried Hester, and she hurried into the kitchen to work instead of plan. There lay the cook book and the tablet with the recipes nicely copied and the menu written out. She pushed them aside. There was no time to even think of five courses, nor to consider the preparing of them.

She worked quickly now. The fire was soon burning brightly and the kettle boiling. She went to the supply closet and brought out a can of despised salmon. In a few minutes she told her Aunt Debby that lunch was served. Alas, for Hester's castles in the air! They had tumbled as dream castles frequently do. Instead

of a dinner of five courses, Debby Alden and her niece sat down to bread and jelly, a cup of tea, and salmon which neither tasted.

Debby was thinking deeply, but she aroused herself and kept up a conversation. She did not like dull meals and she did not wish Hester to form the habit of sitting at the dining-table without engaging in conversation. Debby Alden straightened her shoulders and raised her head after the proud little fashion which was natural with her.

She told Hester of the new goods displayed in the store windows. The Smiths had had their house painted and some one else had put up a new iron fence. There were many things Debby Alden had seen and heard that day, and she repeated them to Hester, giving to each a touch of her own dry humor. Hester laughed just as Debby intended she should, and forgot her visitors of the afternoon.

She almost forgot something else which Debby was hoping she would. It was not until the lunch was finished and they were about to withdraw from the table that a sudden thought came to Hester.

"Did you forget about the letter of Conrad and Westerleigh, Aunt Debby?"

"No, I didn't forget about it, Hester. I met Mrs. Orr on the street and she went with me into Abner Stout's to see some new laces. She's making Jane a white dress."

"Jane told me about it yesterday. Don't you remember, Aunt Debby, I told you that she intended having an overskirt if her mother would make it that way. Did Conrad and Westerleigh want you for anything particular, Aunt Debby?"

"Yes, they did," said Miss Debby slowly. A crimson spot had come to her cheeks and was slowly spreading to her temples. She hesitated about telling Hester all that Conrad and Westerleigh wanted. There was no use in putting the burden of care on Hester's shoulders. On the other hand, if Hester did not know all, she would anticipate, imagine, and in her own mind would make matters worse, perhaps, than they were.

"Yes, they wanted to see me," she repeated. "Their business had nothing whatever to do with stocks. It—it," she hesitated again, and

looked up at Hester. "It is very strange, all together, Hester. I feel to-day as though the dead had come back to life."

Hester's appalled expression brought Debby Alden to herself. "There, there, don't look so. Listen, and I shall tell you all."

## CHAPTER IV

DEBBY ALDEN told Hester all of that interview with Conrad and Westerleigh. She told it without any show of personal feeling. She did this for her own as well as Hester's sake. She made an effort to present the matter to her niece as the attorneys had presented it to her.

"You've heard me speak of my brother Ezra?" she asked.

"Not very often, Aunt Debby. The first time you mentioned his name was last winter. I remember I did not know whom you meant."

"There's an old saying that every flock has its black sheep. People always gave that name to Ezra, although I do not believe he ever deserved it. He was thoughtless, light-hearted, and not so stable or set as were all the other Aldens and Palmers. That is what mother always said. To me, Brother Ezra was only a name. He was the oldest and I the youngest.

I was just a child when he ran from home and went west.

"He did not like farming. Father said he might go into the City to school. He went for a time, but felt as though he would not care to be a professional man. Father gave him several chances, but Ezra wasn't stable. He grew tired of everything he tried. It was just as we all do, only the rest of us 'stuck,' tired or not tired.

"It was the same after he went west. He was first on a ranch, then in silver mines and then in the lumber camp. Then the letters, which had been coming at intervals of months, ceased and nothing more was heard from him. When father died, mother had me write and have notices put in papers asking about him, but nothing came of it, although we sent letters to mining-camps and lumber jobs. That was twenty years ago, and not one word since, until to-day."

"Yes, until to-day. And did you have a letter from him to-day, Aunt Debby?"

"No, but Conrad and Westerleigh had a letter from his wife and daughter more than a month ago. They wrote to get Ezra's share

of father's estate. You understand, I believed firmly that Ezra had died long before and that all father and mother left belonged to me. I was really honest in my convictions. I would not have touched a cent that belonged to Ezra, had I thought him living or had I known he had died and left a daughter." Her eyes filled with tears. "He remembered me, too, and called his little girl Deborah, after me."

A sudden understanding came to Hester.

"Why then, Aunt Debby, that woman with the bleached hair—"

Debby silenced her with a gesture. "She's my brother's widow, Hester, and your aunt. She may not be the kind of woman we're used to knowing, but she's our kin now, and it is not the proper thing to lessen your name by criticizing those who bear it. Maybe we'll feel sorry for her when we come to know her better. She may not have had proper bringing up."

Debby Alden was as keen and logical as one could be along certain lines. There were conditions of life, however, and a class of people of whom she did not know and of whom her

mind had no conception. There were qualities of mind which were foreign alike to her and her people. She had no conception of such qualities, or the people of whom they were characteristic.

“Conrad and Westerleigh have been engaged by this woman. I think they called her Alice. They are authorized to present her claim and see that she gets justice. They wished me to know that they have substantiated proof, and so sent for me. They had the marriage certificate and some old letters I had written Ezra. There was one of my pictures with my name on the back. I had it taken when I was about the age you are now, Hester, but I was not so tall.”

“And will they—that woman and girl come here to live, Aunt Debby? I would not mind the girl so much, but the woman—” She remembered in time that that woman was kin of the Aldens and the very relationship implied and demanded respect.

“I can tell nothing about that yet. Everything must be divided. Ezra was entitled to half of what father and mother left. I should not like to give up this house. Father was born

here, and so was I. A stranger could not have the feeling for it that I have. I think I can arrange to keep the place as it is. Mr. Conrad said something about not wishing to push me too hard. His clients would be willing to take the woodland, letting me have the house and the ground about it. That would mean almost all that is under cultivation."

"That will be fine. Why not tell them you will do that, Aunt Debby? We can live here—just you and I without being bothered by strangers. If we need more money than we have, I can easily earn some."

Debby smiled at the girl's self-confidence. "Tell me, Hester, how you could possibly earn money for us to live on."

"In lots of ways, Aunt Debby. I have often thought of it. There are more ways than one that I could earn a living."

"Is preparing course dinners one of them?"

Hester's cheeks flushed. For an instant, she was touched and her eyes were swimming with tears as she looked up at her aunt.

"Never mind, Hessie, I was teasing just a little. You generally fulfill your obligations.

This afternoon was an exception and I do not wonder that you forgot that people must eat."

"Why don't you let them have the woodland and the ravine? It really does not amount to much. You have never gotten any money from it. Have you, Aunt Debby?"

"I never have and never expect to. It is really worth nothing at all. The timber if cut very close is worth but a few hundred dollars. Because it is of so little value, I do not wish to make the division in that way. They do not understand that neither soil nor timber is good for anything. I do; so I must not take advantage of their lack of knowledge."

There was silence between them for some time. Hester kept her eyes fixed in a design in the table-cloth. She was trying to think of some fair division by which Aunt Debby and she could retain the house and yard and the gardens beyond. A number of ideas came to her, but she did not put them into words, feeling confident that Debby Alden might not consider them just to Ezra's heirs. There were other considerations of the subject which were presenting themselves to Hester's mind. When

the division would be made, would there be enough for Aunt Debby and her to live upon, or would it be necessary for them to work outside the home in order to provide for it and themselves? There was no roundabout method in Hester's mind. When a question presented itself, she put it into words directly.

"Shall we have enough to live upon, Aunt Debby?" she asked.

"We shall not starve," replied Debby Alden. "I never knew of an Alden starving and I should not like to be the first of the name to do it—"

"I know we shall not starve, but will there be anything to pay for our clothes and what we eat, and—"

"To go to the Seminary until we have a diploma?" added Debby. She felt that Hester was taking the matter too seriously—quite as seriously as she herself—and she did what she could to loosen the tension.

"I am afraid there may be no more years at the Seminary for you and delightful care-free months in town for me; but that shall not worry us, however. We did without those luxuries

before and were happy enough. We can do without them again, I fancy, and be as happy as ever."

"But your interest money—the money you use to pay the expenses of the house. Will you have that?"

"That was part of what father left. Half of it belongs to Ezra, too. We will deny ourselves hereafter and make the half cover what the whole used to. That will mean no five-course dinners, but bread and tea and jelly will keep us from starving."

"I wish, Aunt Debby, you would not laugh at me. I really wish to know all about this trouble and how much money we will have to live on."

It was wiser, perhaps, to tell her all. Debby explained the finances of the family. There was money out on school bonds and city bonds. In town she held several mortgages on desirable property. This had afforded her a good income and, with her home and garden, had given to her and Hester more than a comfortable living. If cut in two, however, one part would be but a scant living.

"We shall not worry about that, Hester. We shall wait until the matter is adjusted. We'll get along nicely. I never knew an Alden or a Palmer either, for that matter, to get 'stuck.' I shall be true to my family. Never fear."

She arose from the table. "That is settled now. We'll think no more about it. We'll clear away the lunch and then take a walk down to see Jane. It is beautiful outdoors. We'll move into the sunlight and not sit indoors moping."

When the work was completed, they walked down the road to call on Mrs. Orr and Jane. Debby kept up a conversation and by mere force of will brought Hester into it. She was determined that the girl should not let her mind dwell on the difficulties which were besetting their path.

For that evening at least, Debby was successful. Hester chatted and laughed and for the time forgot the confidence of the tea-table. The following morning, however, she was left to her own devices. She had not slept well the night before. She had reproduced mentally all the incidents of the day, and when she fell asleep

she dreamed of Mrs. Ezra, which was to be expected. The yellow-haired woman of the dream was no less formidable than the real woman.

Hester went even further than picturing past events. She saw with her mind's eye all that might take place. Aunt Debby and she were being moved from the old home; then she saw themselves shut up in a little dark flat, making a pretense of living. So her mind went from one scene to another, step by step. So real had it become to her that she found her eyes overflowing and her body shaking convulsively. She put her head under the covers and sobbed. It was all so pathetic and sad, yet Hester found a genuine enjoyment in picturing the scene. She had found the joy of phantasy—an intellectual state where suffering is a mark of rank.

The following morning she had an errand to Mary Bowerman's. When the sun was hot, the way across the orchard and through the ravine was pleasanter than the public highway. Hester took the path through the ravine. She missed the beauty of the brook and light and shadows, for her mind was yet working on the problems which had presented themselves the

evening before. She was in a jubilant mental state now. She came to the brook and sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree and laid her plans. She intended to begin at once and take care of her Aunt Debby. The humorous side of the case did not present itself to Hester. It was really ridiculous to think of Debby Alden, strong, keen-minded and practical, and barely past forty years of age, needing any one to take care of her. It looked very much as though it would be the other way round, and Debby would see to taking care of others. But Hester was honest in her convictions and ambitions. She would work and provide the money for the household expenses. Just how she would manage to do this was not clear to her just yet; but she had faith in herself and the way opens somehow to those who start in to win.

She sat on the log with her head bent forward, her elbows on her knees, and her upturned palms pressing hard on each cheek. It was a good position for thinking, for it shut out the world about. Her eyes rested on only a tiny portion of the brook. She went over in

her mind all the work possible for a girl to do: clerking—she knew she would not like that; work in an office—but she could not use a type-writer and that had become a necessity; teaching—she shuddered at the thought. Hearing and explaining lessons would not be bad, but managing a roomful of children would be beyond her. Writing and newspaper work—this came last when all the while it had been really first in her mind. That would be only a pleasure. She could do it, too. She did not have a doubt in her mind of that. Here was something to work upon. Her spirits went up like the mercury of a thermometer with the bulb over flame. She would get on a newspaper staff, and incidentally write a few short stories so fine and original that editors would write beseeching her to send her work to them. She saw herself as plain as could be sitting before her desk opening letters. All about her were manuscript papers in all degrees of completeness and incompleteness.

There would be a great deal of money as a result of this work. Aunt Debby would no longer need count her pennies so closely. Hester

would hire a little maid to wash the dishes. Hester herself disliked washing dishes. Debby had made an effort to cultivate a dish-washing taste in her niece, but had not succeeded.

Hester as she sat on the trunk of the upturned tree had become a novelist, a millionaire, and had taken several European tours—all while she sat on the upturned tree. The only trouble with her plans was that the first step had not been taken. An hour passed. Hester had received as much pleasure from her air castles as though they were already on good stone foundations—perhaps more. So happy was she in her dreams that she might have sat thus all day, unconscious of the time, had not the sound of voices broken in upon her reverie.

For an instant she was afraid and drew back that she might be hidden among the low alder bushes. The voices drew nearer. There was the sound of crackling branches as the persons made their way through the light underbrush. They were not coming by the footpath, then, and would not see her. Hester sat quiet. She was afraid of tramps and was afraid that it might be these wanderers who were making

their way over the hill. Any one but a stranger would have known the path.

At last three men came over the brow of the hill. They had come in from the public road and had not crossed the fields belonging either to Sam Bowerman or Debby Alden. They had taken the most difficult way; but they were not liable to be seen from either house. They paused when they came to the brow of the hill. They were less than a rod from Hester. She pushed aside the alder branches and peered out. Two of the men she had never seen before. They looked like prosperous business men. Both were clean, honest-looking. The third—Hester instinctively shrank back when her eyes fell upon him. It was the man called Jim Bates, whom she had seen in the train the day she and Aunt Debby had come home, and who had known some one whom Hester strangely resembled.

Jim Bates was doing the talking. The other men listened attentively, now and then asking a question or making a gesture. The man, Bates, talked rapidly. Then he walked to the brow of the hill and pointed in different direc-

tions as though he were making an explanation to the men.

"It's a business proposition to us and nothing more," said the elder of the listeners. "If the thing is worth while to us, we are willing to buy. If not, why then the other thing. You understand that we're not in this as a matter of pleasure or sentiment. It's a business proposition, pure and simple."

Hester heard. She liked the man's appearance and voice. Jim Bates began again. This time Hester caught part of his words, for in his excitement his voice became higher pitched. "I'm not asking you to take my word for it. You saw the report that your own man made. He knows his business, doesn't he? He knows salt from sand. Then in addition to this, there's the report that the State geologist made. That's printed and verified and published that every one may read."

He stood erect and interested. He had a roll of newspapers in his right hand. With these he kept up a continued movement, striking them against the palm of his left hand to emphasize the statements he was making. Sud-

denly he thrust the papers before his companions. "The report's here—the State geologist's. Do you wish to see it?"

The man waved him aside with a gesture.

"We've seen it." He smiled blandly and added, "Indeed, I may say we have made a study of it."

They moved farther away. The man called Bates was yet talking and explaining. His sentences were no longer clear to Hester. Just a word reached her ears. "Decision soon—one hundred thousand at the least—three months' option." They moved away in the direction from which they had come. Hester arose and crossing the brook made her way to the Bowerman house. She gave little thought to the conversation she had heard. "I'm getting to be an eavesdropper," she said to herself and smiled at the thought. "Twice within a short time, I've sat and listened to what was not intended for my ears. I suppose my hearing really did not matter. I don't think it was dishonest to listen, placed as I was. Neither time could I help hearing, nor could I get up and walk away."

Three strange men talking business. Nothing at all important. She did not give it a second thought.

Mary Bowerman was very much excited over a camping-party which she thought of organizing.

"Father has a camp up Bogg's Run," she said. "Camping is all the rage now. If I can manage it, we'll make up a party and go and stay for a week. The camps were new last winter and nice and clean. August is just the month for camping."

"You can easily find enough people to go. I'm sure I would not hesitate. That is, if I'm to be invited," she added. It came to her then that in view of the newspaper position, which she meant to secure, and the great amount of money she meant to earn, she would have no time to go camping. She had judgment enough not to tell her plans to any one else. She listened to Mary's ideas concerning the camp and offered all the advice that she could.

"I think Aunt Elizabeth Kenson will chaperon us."

"That will be lovely. Every one likes her,"

said Hester. "You'll name your camp, won't you? Every one I ever heard of gave their camp a name."

"Certainly. Do you think we'd let it go without a name? Jane Orr thinks Camp Elizabeth would be appropriate in honor of the chaperon, you know."

"Yes, I think it should be," said Hester.

This Aunt Elizabeth, as every one called her, was aunt to no one at all—and yet aunt to every young person of her young acquaintance. She had neither niece nor nephew. She was home-maker for a brother whose wife and children had died many years before. She was a woman almost sixty. She laughed and sang and had a good joke at her tongue's end. Her cookies and salads had won a reputation throughout the countryside. When her neighbors had children of school age, Aunt Libby put her cookie-jar on the back porch so that they would not need to track mud in on her clean kitchen floor. By tactful methods as that of properly placing a cookie-jar, Miss Kenson had won for herself a large following of self-constituted nieces and nephews.

While Hester listened to the plans of the prospective camp, the strangers had come down from the hill and ravine and passed along the road before the Bowerman home. Hester saw them and concluded that since the men had gone she would return home by the way she came.

It was almost midday when she bade Mary Bowerman good-by. Aunt Debby had told her not to stay long, but with her day-dreaming as she sat on the trunk of the tree, and being detained by the strange men in her way, she had spent the entire morning away from home. As though to compensate for her being a laggard, she almost ran across the field and the brook, but when it came to the ascent of the hill she was out of breath and could not hurry.

At the top of the hill lay the papers which Jim Bates had thrown aside when his companions had declared that they did not care to look at them. The sheets were loose and the breeze had scattered them about. Hester paused long enough to pick one up. It was a bulletin issued by the government. It was a mass of technical terms in geology. Hester read part of one page. Silica—37.13; Alumina 52.31; Titanic

Acid 4.26; Iron 3.66; Lime .60; Magnesia .18; Potash .62; Soda 1.22; Total 99.98. This stratum lies in the region embraced—” Hester personally cared nothing about it. She hurried along home with the paper yet in her hand. When she entered the summer kitchen or out-kitchen, she threw the paper into a basket where Debby kept refuse for kindling the fire.

## CHAPTER V

DEBBY ALDEN with all her keenness and years of experience was unsophisticated in some matters. She could not conceive of certain conditions of deceit and knavery. Therefore when Conrad and Westerleigh told her the story of Ezra's marriage, and the claim that his wife and daughter had brought, and had shown her a marriage certificate and the letters she herself had written to Ezra, she accepted the matter as settled and stood ready to give to the woman and her daughter Ezra's share of the Alden estate.

Fortunately for her, however, the deeds and bonds were in a safe with Hendig and Hintner. Debby's asking for them entailed questions, and soon the attorneys knew that Ezra's widow had appeared to claim her share.

"And you mean to hand it over without a word—without investigating the claim?" asked the junior partner. He was surprised at Debby

Alden. He had believed her to be intensely practical.

"It's only right that Ezra's heirs should have his share," she said. "I would not be dishonest."

"Nor would I have you be. Responsibilities work in both directions, Miss Alden. You never have fully grasped that."

She looked at him in surprise. His words sounded much like a criticism of her conduct. "I am afraid I do not fully understand."

"We must not only be honest ourselves, but we must keep other people to it. I agree with you that Ezra's heirs should have every cent that is theirs, but I would be quite sure that they were his heirs."

"You think—" began Debby. The attorney shook his head and laughed. "No, I do not think. They tell me that lawyers are not expected to, but I assure you of one thing. I would have positive proof before I gave one cent. To do otherwise would put a premium on trickery and knavery."

"I saw the marriage certificate. They had

letters, too, which I had written to Ezra. That is how they found my address."

"Undoubtedly; yet we'll not take their proof. We'll look up the matters for ourselves. I say we, Miss Alden, because I intend taking the matter in my own hand. I intend seeing to it that Miss Debby Alden does not hand over her portion to the first person who comes and asks for it."

Miss Debby gasped in surprise, yet she experienced a feeling of relief. She was glad that her attorney had taken matters into his own hands. His words had given her a new view of the matter. For the first time a doubt as to the reliability of the claim made against her came to her mind. The attorney, who read people well, understood what Debby's expression meant. He was honest. He had known the Alden family all his life and he had a high regard for Miss Debby. More than this, he did not like to see a trickster win. He would have taken the case for that reason if for no other.

"I have no intention of giving these papers

into your hands, Miss Debby," he continued. "I appreciate their value better than you. I shall send a note to Conrad and Westerleigh informing them that the matter has been placed in my hands and that any further communication must be made through me. Then, Miss Debby, if they bring up the question, refer them to me. Don't discuss the subject with them. They might be sharp enough to hold you on some of your own words."

"I wish to do what is honest. If this woman is Ezra's widow—"

"If she is, she will have all that is her due. We will deal fairly and aboveboard, Miss Debby. I think I have dealt no other way with you or any one else, either friend or enemy.

"This woman may trouble you again as she did your little girl several days ago. It is not to be put up with. I shall inform her lawyers that there must be no trespassing. If the woman asks your permission, refer her to me. Never allow her to gain a foothold there under the plea that you were willing."

That was the end of the interview. A great sense of relief came to Debby Alden as she

made her way home. She was rid of the responsibility. She knew that Mr. Hendig would be perfectly just and honorable. She did not believe, however, that the woman was not honest in her claims. Debby could not conceive of a mind that could plan and carry out such a scheme of deception and trickery. Because she could not conceive of it, she believed it impossible.

The Alden characteristic asserted itself now. She had done all that lay in her power. She could do nothing more at present. So she dismissed that phase of the case from her mind. She began to plan for the future in case her income would be cut in half. She did not worry. On the contrary she was quite hopeful and her plans were not a little after the order of an air-castle.

“I’ll get through,” she said to herself. “I never knew an Alden to get ‘stuck’ yet.” This was half her battle, faith in herself and the traditions of her people.

Hester was absent-minded as she performed the duties about the house. She had tried to keep her wits about her and have the dinner

ready when Debby came home. Debby had attended to the roast herself and had planned to be home early, but when the noon hour drew near, Hester decided to attend to matters herself.

Jane Orr had come in at eleven o'clock.

"Auntie said I should not bother with dinner, but she's been detained longer than she expected. I think I'll finish dinner."

"Do," exclaimed Jane. "I'll help. I'm a fine cook—in theory. There's nothing I love so much as fussing around in the kitchen with pots and pans."

"Don't you ever do it at home?" asked Hester.

"No, it causes too much fuss. Mother's perfectly willing. Indeed she wishes me to know how to cook, but Morgan is the head of the kitchen and will not let me stick my nose in." Jane paused. Her dimpled, laughing face took on a sober look. "I did make fudge last winter several times, but I had to wait until Morgan and Sadie went off to some party. Then I had things my own way, and I sailed around that kitchen like a queen."

"I never knew queens sailed around kitchens," said Hester.

"The more pity for them if they don't," said Jane. "Come, let us finish. I think I know how to make gravy." She hurried to the kitchen and Hester followed.

"At least I can pare potatoes," she said, and fell upon a pan of them. She was beaming with delight. She made the paring-knife move quickly. She had the air of elevation which comes to one when she is accomplishing the thing upon which she has set her heart.

"Your parings are rather thick," said Hester. "Aunt Debby taught me to pare them thin—just as thin as possible. A great deal is wasted otherwise."

"That is so," exclaimed Jane. "I never thought of that. How nice it is to be taught things. You must know a lot about cooking and housekeeping, Hester."

"I'm not so bad at it." By comparison with Jane, Hester felt that she knew all that was to be known in the line of domestic science. "Helen Loraine intends to visit me sometime this summer. She and I will do all the cook-

ing. It will be a mere pastime for us. You'd dearly love Helen, Jane. You just couldn't help it even though you might try."

"I know I'd love her. You and I always did like the same people, Hester. You know you've always told me that our Ralph was the very nicest boy you—"

"That was before I met Rob Vail," interposed. Hester. "Rob is the very—" She paused in time. Jane's eyes were growing suspiciously brilliant, and a little touch of red was in her cheek. "Your Ralph and Rob Vail are the very nicest boys I ever saw. I don't see how they could be nicer."

"It's a good thing you said it that way, Hester. I couldn't possibly put up with any one being nicer than Ralph. I'm quite prepared to love Helen."

"You'll simply adore her, and she will you. Did I tell you that she looks so much like me that people were always mistaking us?" But Jane lost this last remark.

Having finished the potatoes, she was deep in the kettle closet in search of a suitable vessel to cook them in. She emerged at last with a

kettle in hand. "This is what I call living," she cried, as she moved about putting the potatoes on the stove. "Cook what you please and no servants to tell you to keep away from the kitchen. Why, Hester, you and your Aunt Debby can come in here just when you please and make cake or fudge or whatever you want without asking any one. It must seem like heaven to you."

Hester had never thought of the matter in that light. On the contrary, she had believed Jane's lot to be enviable. Hester herself had rather coveted a cook and maid and laundry woman. She expressed herself so now.

"That's just because you don't know, Hessie. I'm really honest when I say that it seems like heaven to be pottering about in a lovely kitchen like this." Her eyes went about the room from the dainty sash curtains to the chair and footstool by the window and the big gray cat lying in the streak of sunlight which came through the open door.

In spite of Jane's flow of conversation, Hester's thoughts wandered toward Aunt Debby's troubles and the position that Hester intended

looking up for herself. She lived her dreams of the day before and saw herself advanced from newspaper work to the rank of novelist.

"I'll make the coffee," she said in the midst of her day-dreaming. "Aunt Debby is very particular about her coffee. It must be just so." She set the coffee-pot on the back of the stove. The water in the kettle was bubbling. Hester turned aside to measure out the coffee.

"I wish you'd attend to this," Jane thrust a bowl of flour and water in her hand. "It doesn't look just right. The flour is in lumps and I know it shouldn't be that way. I don't know what made it do it. It just lumped up all of itself. I didn't do a thing."

Hester took it from her hand. "I'll mix it smooth." She rubbed the lumps against the side of the bowl with a wooden spoon until the mixture was smooth. All the while, her thoughts were wool-gathering, and she did not do just as she intended.

However, dinner was ready when Aunt Debby returned. Jane met her at the door and escorted her in. "Everything's fine,

Miss Debby. Dinner is ready to be served. Roast beef, mashed potatoes, fine dressing, and coffee that will make your mouth water just to smell. Hester and I prepared it."

"I shall do it justice. Brown gravy with mashed potatoes is not to be despised. I've never been strong enough to resist a good cup of coffee with cream."

"Almost thick enough to cut. We skimmed the cream crock."

In honor of the event, Jane had gotten down the green decorated china. She had festooned the table with a fine green creeping vine and had a low bowl of flowers in the center.

"Don't you think it looks nice, Miss Debby?" she exclaimed. "The roast is so nice and brown. Just the way I like it."

Miss Debby served the plates. When she had cut the meat in appetizing slices and put on the plate a portion of the vegetables, she looked about her. "Your gravy, Hester. Have you forgotten to bring it in?"

A bewildered expression came to Hester's face. She excused herself and went to the kitchen. No gravy was in sight. She ex-

amined the pan in which the meat had roasted. There was not a trace of nice brown gravy there.

"Did you do anything with my gravy, Jane?"

This question brought Jane into the kitchen. She looked about everywhere; but not a trace of the gravy could be seen. As a last resort, she examined the pan. "It doesn't look as though any nice brown gravy was in there," she said.

"Are you sure you made it, Hester?"

"Sure? Don't you remember that you mixed the flour and water and handed it to me? There's the bowl that had it in. I must have made it."

There was another search, but no gravy was anywhere to be found.

"Let us say it has disappeared by some means unknown," suggested Jane. "It's unexplainable. Let us go back to dinner."

They did so. "It's too bad," said Miss Debby, "after you had taken so much trouble. It may have gone up the chimney."

"The cat did have a knowing expression in the corner of her eye," said Jane. "Let's

blame it on the cat. Every house must have something to put the blame on. At our house, we put the blame on the dog."

"Since you can have no gravy, I shall break over an old rule and give you both coffee," said Miss Debby. "I have never permitted Hester to touch it except on very rare occasions. I think this comes under the head of rare occasions. I never knew gravy to disappear as this has. I think it might be called a very rare occasion."

Miss Debby poured thick cream into the three cups, took up her coffee-pot and poured a spoonful out. Then she stopped and looked bewildered.

"The coffee has been bewitched, too," she said. "I never knew coffee to pour like this." She raised the lid and peered into the urn. Then she poured out a little into a cup and examined it.

As she did so, the light of understanding came to Hester and Jane.

"The gravy—" cried Jane. "I handed it to you while you were making the coffee."

"I was thinking of something else—I put the

flour and water into the coffee-pot," cried Hester.

Then they laughed. Jane's dimples came and went. Her eyes overflowed with laughter. She made a vain attempt to maintain a proper decorum and to eat her meal as became a well-bred guest; but whenever her eyes fell upon Hester, or upon the coffee urn, the humor of the occasion seized her and she burst into a fit of laughter. In spite of the humiliation, Hester joined her.

"I'm glad it happened," said Jane when she was able to control her voice. "It's more fun than gravy. I must tell our cook a new way to make coffee; a tablespoonful of flour to a quart of boiling water. Serve from the coffee-pot and no one will know the difference."

"It's just as well to take troubles philosophically," said Debby Alden. "Had we indulged freely in coffee and made use of the cream, there would have been no dessert. As it is, we may have it with our tapioca pudding."

"I did not know you had made pudding," said Hester, when Miss Debby brought forth the dessert.

"It is well you did not, you and Jane might have tried to cook it with the potatoes." She smiled at the girls as she gave them generously of the thick rich cream.

"I shall help with the dishes," said Jane. "You sit in the living-room, Miss Debby, and take life easy while Hester and I finish the work."

Miss Debby did as she was requested. She heard Jane shriek with laughter while she was trying to get the sticky, starchy mass from the coffee-pot.

"Aunt Debby, I have an errand in town," said Hester. "I'll walk in with Jane."

"The sun is very hot, Hessie. Why did you not tell me? I would have performed any little commission for you while I was there this morning."

"You couldn't have done this, Aunt Debby. This is one of the things I must do for myself. It's a secret."

"I think she intends writing a cook book," said Jane. "She'll call it 'Hester Alden's Practical Recipes'—no home should be without it. You may put me down for a copy, Hester.

I know it will be very funny. I'll put it in the library among the 'Wit and Humor' books."

Hester pretended not to hear. She had turned her back upon Jane and was adjusting her hat before the mirror. Jane's remark about writing a book had come so near the truth that a flush spread over Hester's cheeks.

The mistake with the coffee had not taught Hester all it should. She was building air-castles while she and Jane went through the orchard and down the ravine and over the brook.

When they came to Jane's home, that young lady paused at the gate and said, "Hester, I shouldn't mind walking into town. I'd really rather like it. If you do not object, I'll speak to mother, and I'll go with you. I'll take my purse with me. We'll get some ice-cream sodas or candy." The last was generally tacked to any and all of Jane's errands into the business portion of the town. She had a sweet tooth abnormally developed. She was about to hurry away into the house to get her purse when Hester stopped her.

"This isn't just an ordinary errand, Jane,"

she said. "If it was, I would have asked you to come along. It's business and very important business at that. I've told no one about it—not even Aunt Debby. So you understand—"

"Yes, you'd rather be alone. I understand. Sometimes it is like that. Of course, you cannot attend to business with me with you. We'll go together some other time, Hester. I'm just dying to have you taste Lawson's new cream and sundaes. They're a dream—simply a dream." She turned in at her home.

"Good-by, Hester, and good luck in your business."

Hester smiled complacently at the well wishes.

"Good luck," surely, she would have good luck. She had always heard that good reporters were scarce. No doubt the newspapers would be only too glad to avail themselves of her services, and pay her well for it. She was not quite sure what salary newspaper people received, but the work was professional and consequently would be well paid. Being a beginner, she would not expect much. She would

be quite willing to begin at twenty dollars a week, that would mean eighty dollars a month. She and Aunt Debby could live quite well on that with what they had.

There were four newspaper offices in town. Hester took them in order of arrangement; the nearest one first. This was the *Ledger*. The building was quite imposing with a brownstone front. Notices on the broad stairway indicated the various departments. She decided that the editor rather than the business manager was the person she must see; so she made her way to the second floor front. Her knock was not at all timid. She was so confident of success and her own ability that her self-consciousness had been absorbed by them.

Upon the invitation, she entered the room. It was not just as she expected. There were no handsome rugs and polished floors. The windows were actually grimy. At a table sat a big fat man in shirt sleeves. His collar and tie were unfastened. A pipe was between his lips and the air was thick. He was putting the blue pencil to good use, working with lightning-

like rapidity. A boy stood at his elbow picking up "copy" as the editor threw it aside.

"Sit down," he said, and continued his work. When he had read a score of sheets and the boy had gone away with them, the editor turned toward Hester without words, but with interrogation in his expression.

She told her errand. He listened with his fingers fastened on the blue pencil and his eyes glancing at the papers on the desk. When she had finished her statement, he replied shortly. "No possible opening. Couldn't give it to you if there were. Never take in a green hand. Too much trouble to break them in."

That was all. He was absorbed in the copy before him. Hester felt herself dismissed and went down the stairs. Her discouragement had taken to itself wings before she reached the street. She would try the *Tribune* next. The editor of the *Ledger* had called her a "green hand." The next time she presented her case, she would tell them that she had been on the staff of the *Mirror*. The appearance of the *Inquirer* office was more pleasing. It

was clean at least. The editor was not smoking and his collar and tie were not disarranged. He listened to Hester's statements with a show of interest. He expressed his confidence in her ability to do the work. His only regret, however, was that there was no vacant place on the paper to offer her. There might be at any time. If she would leave her address, he would inform her whenever the *Inquirer* needed her services.

Hester complied with this request and then arose to leave the office. There was a dignity and self-poise about the girl which was pleasing. She had never been brow-beaten or deceived and so was confident and fearless; yet in her confidence was no boldness. She met and talked with these strangers as she would have talked with Debby Alden or Helen Loraine.

When she had gone, this gentleman of promises rang for the hall usher. When the trembling lad appeared, he turned upon him, "Where were you, that that young lady was permitted to reach this office. I'm always busy, you understand. I thought I had made

that plain to you. I have no time to listen to talk of schoolgirls. See that it does not happen again."

After leaving the *Inquirer* office, Hester was tempted to go no farther. It might be that this paper would have need of her services in a short time. It might be wise to go home and wait until she was sent for by the editor of the *Inquirer*. But fortunately, she reconsidered. It might be five or six weeks before there would be an opening on that staff. If she was not working all that time, it would mean an actual loss of almost one hundred dollars; that is, at a salary of twenty dollars a week and that was the lowest that she would accept.

As if to influence her for a third interview, the office of the *Daily Record* flaunted itself in her way. Hester had something of Debby Alden's "set" ways. She did not like the idea of giving up. She would continue the search for work. Her need of a position was not evident in her appearance. Her face was as bright and cheerful as the morning sun. She wore a white shirt-waist suit, and a big white

Milan hat with a bow of white ribbon and bobbing heads of black-eyed Susans.

The *Record* office was not tidy. The floor was littered with paper. The managing editor had his feet on the desk and "copy" in his hands. By his side stood a young man little older than Hester herself. He was listening attentively to the editor.

"You fell flat on that Republican meeting. What was the trouble with you? There was meat enough in it for two good columns. See that you do better on this. Better do it up for two thousand if it will warrant it."

The boy nodded and left the office. Hester saw him take down his hat from a peg and hurry away. He didn't look altogether cheerful over the assignment.

The editor-in-chief lowered his feet to the floor before he addressed Hester. He watched her keenly while she talked. His eyes peered out from beneath bushy eyebrows as though he had lowered them in anger. He asked a few pertinent questions. Her year at the Seminary and her having taken charge of the personal on the *Mirror* seemed of some importance

to him. He let Hester do the talking while he sat with his eyes fixed upon her. When she had finished, he turned his head and called out, "Blinn, come here."

A tall, lank young man came in and seated himself on the edge of the table, and looked calmly at his chief as though waiting orders.

Few words appeared to be the order of the office. "What did the doctor say about Wilson?"

"'Fraid of typhoid. Couldn't know for several days. He's got to stay out of the office for a month anyway and considerable more if it turns out to be fever."

"Seems to ball us all up. I was short enough before. Tell Bateman to take Wilson's assignment. You attend to Bateman's. Oh, yes, the salary goes to the one who does the work. This young lady can take the cub's place—until Wilson gets on his feet."

Hester's face flushed. She had not heard the word "cub" used in such a way. She did not know that it was a term applied to the reporter new to the work, and who began with personals.

Blinn went his way without further word. The managing editor turned to Hester. "Come to-morrow morning ready for work. Nine o'clock is the hour. We pay a dollar a day."

"Seven dollars a week," said Hester. Her castles had tumbled about her head. Perhaps not the entire castle, but at least one wing of it. The main building always stood with her.

"Seven? No, six a week. You don't work on Sunday, you know."

## CHAPTER VI

DEBBY ALDEN was not well-pleased when Hester came home with her story.

“I wish you would have spoken of the matter to me first,” she said. She was about to say more—to be really severe, but the disappointed look on Hester’s face deterred her.

“I did it to help you, Aunt Debby. You’ll not have enough to live on. You told me yourself. Six dollars a week is not much, but I’ll soon earn more. Will six dollars a week pay for what I eat?” she added.

“Much more,” said Debby. She realized that the girl had actually been worrying over being a burden when she knew that Debby’s income would be cut in half. “You must remember that all our vegetables and fruit are provided for us. It does not take a great deal for you and me, Hester.”

“I thought my salary would be larger,” said Hester. “I should not like to think of your

working away from home." She had been serious. Now she tried to turn her mood aside. She finished gayly, "You took care of me for sixteen years, Miss Debby Alden, now, it is my turn."

"Not for a great many years, Hester Alden. Not until I am an old, old lady. Then you may wait upon me until your muscles ache."

She had meant to speak sharply to Hester and to reprimand her for her going off and securing a position without first securing Debby's permission or at least advice. Instead of this, she took the girl's face between her palms and kissed her on cheeks and lips.

"Your judgment may lead you into error, Hessie, but your heart is in its right place," was all she said.

No more was said then, but the matter was heavy on Debby Alden's heart. She did not know what course to follow. Her first impulse was to forbid Hester's accepting the position. There were other considerations that came to her. Debby Alden was learning something of the great principles of life—the letting each person develop himself along individual lines;

the privilege of making the most of himself and his talents, and that not by rule set down by another. She knew Alex MacMurray, the editor, by reputation and had confidence in him. Debby considered all the phases of the subject after she had retired. It was long after midnight when she had reached a satisfactory conclusion. She would let Hester try the work.

The following morning Hester was up earlier than usual. In spite of the paltry six dollars a week, there was an excitement and interest about the wage-earning which was worth more than the money. She sat at the breakfast-table but did not eat. It was not until Debby insisted that she made an effort.

“Not one step shall you go until you eat your toast and egg and drink your milk,” said Debby, to whom a loss of appetite was a calamity and presaged all manner of physical disorders.

“Take time and eat slowly. You always eat an egg for breakfast. I do not see why you should not now.”

Debby looked upon herself as a rigid disciplinarian. She had decided years before that

she would be just and firm with Hester. She would not spoil her. She had seen quite enough of foolish mothers and their ways with children. Debby meant to have none of that. She would be firm and just, and not yield to the child's caprices or whims. In prospect, the course was easy to follow, but she had not counted on one element of this self-assumed relationship. Hester had wrapped herself about Debby Alden's heartstrings and what hurt Hester hurt Debby even more. She would have granted every wish the girl expressed had not her native judgment asserted itself. Fortunately, there had been but few times when Hester needed what her aunt was pleased to term a "firm hand," and then Debby had to force herself to it.

This morning Debby was not spoiling the girl, but she hovered about her very much as a foolishly fond mother would have done. When Hester set forth for town, Debby walked with her to the gate, gave a parting adjustment to her collar, smoothed out her hair ribbons and then stood watching her until she was out of sight. It was evident from such little at-

tentions that Debby Alden was not one to spoil a child with kindness.

The young men were not in the office when Hester entered, but Miss Maynard, a stenographer, was busy at her machine. She was a fair-haired slender girl, with the look of one who had worked beyond the limit of her strength and was tired out. She was doing rush work, but she stopped at Hester's entrance and came forward with outstretched hands.

"You're Hester Alden," she said. "I'm Helen Maynard. We have seen each other often, but never have become acquainted. Your desk is there." She pointed to a table near the window. "I put my wraps in the closet at the right. I think you'll find an extra hook for yours."

Hester had shaken hands and smiled. She was at a loss for words. Something within her was bubbling over. Speech had left her for a time. She looked at her desk with a pile of manuscript paper and a box of pencils and a notebook. Oh, the glory of it all! To be in an office. To have one's own desk and to write

beautiful thoughts which would inspire the world. The pen was what molded the opinions of the world, and she, Hester Alden, was to have a part in this great work. The thought of her importance quite overcame her, and she sank into her chair. She was so far in the clouds that she could look down on the roofs of her own air-castles.

There was a yellow sheet of paper filled with hieroglyphics in blue pencil. After her first rhapsodies, Hester's eyes beheld this. She took it up to read. It was evidently intended for her. "Party at Henderson's on North Street—100. Get points on the Country Club dinner for this evening—names complete. Mrs. John H. Herron for verification—all it's worth."

She read it a second time. Miss Maynard had returned to her typewriting. She had been in the office for a number of years. She had seen many a cub-reporter come and either go or develop into an all-around newspaper man. She read the expression on Hester's face. She left her work again and came to the new reporter. Taking up the yellow sheet, she

read it over. It was not Greek to her as it had been to Hester.

"Your assignments for this morning," she said simply.

"But what am I to do with them?" asked Hester. "I don't know the meaning of the numbers and the verification and 'all it's worth.' "

Miss Maynard took up the paper and explained as she read. "You're to go to Henderson's on North Street and get the particulars of a party which they had. You're to write one hundred words on it; but before you come back to write it, take a car out to the Country Club and ask for Mrs. Herron. She will give you the particulars of the dinner which she is to give to-night. She'll want to. She'll welcome you with open arms. There is nothing she likes better than seeing her name in the paper. That's her principal reason for giving parties. If she isn't there, some one will tell you where to find her. You may have to take a car back and go out to her home. Names complete—that means that you must have the full name of every guest—just as they have it

on their cards. All it's worth—get every particular, decorations, caterer, and courses, and write it out in full. The personals you can pick up as you go along. You'll be surprised at how much you can pick up when you're on the news scent."

Miss Maynard moved away. Hester had barely time to thank her. The young men came into the office. Some had work all ready to write up. Others looked over their assignments.

"Bateman whistled, took a chair, hoisted his feet to the top of his desk and opened a magazine.

"Easy," said the man that the editor had called Blinn.

"Until ten-thirty. Howard is to come in on the express with a crowd of henchmen. I'm to be among those present, Funny Mac assigned me. He said I fell flat on the last report."

"I heard them calling you down. Well, you needn't get sore about it. Every man gets his call. I got it in the neck yesterday."

"I wish Mac had done it himself," said Bateman. "There wasn't a thing said that was

worth writing up. He gave me two columns and there wasn't meat enough to cover a good headline. What can a fellow do when there isn't a thing said worth reporting."

"Use your imagination, my son. Use your imagination," said Blinn. He took up his hat, looked at his watch and grabbing a pad and pencil hurried away, calling back over his shoulder, "Farewell, my own true love, light of my life, farewell."

No one except Miss Maynard had addressed Hester. She wondered if they had seen her. Their slang expressions were new to her. She detested the smell of tobacco. She was drawing into her shell and was about to put on a little haughty air which came to her when matters did not please her. She reconsidered in time. She remembered that she was now but one of many, and not the only one, as she was with Aunt Debby.

"I think I would start out on my assignments," said Miss Maynard, without taking her eyes from her notes.

"Thank you," said Hester. "I did not know just what to do, where to go."

She found the Henderson home on North Street. To her delight, Marie, the daughter, had been one of her schoolfellows in the High School. She and Hester were delighted to see each other. There was no difficulty to get news here. Marie gave all the details of the party. One could have written several columns on the information which she gave. She was delighted to hear that Hester was a literary woman. She did not use the word "reporter." Hester liked her better because of that.

"I would dearly love to be a literary woman," said Marie. "I always thought you'd be one. You always had such good essays in the High School. I used to sit and wonder how you came to think of all the things you wrote. How could you think of them?"

"They thought themselves," said Hester. "One day I would not know anything about them, and then all of a sudden they'd pop into my head and just make me write them."

"That's just genius," said Marie in whole-souled admiration. "I would dearly love to

be a literary woman. I couldn't though. I'm not naturally brainy like you."

She came to the door with Hester, and invited her to come again. "If I had known that you were a reporter, I would have certainly invited you to my party last evening," were her parting words.

Hester went her way delighted with herself and the world. She had not known that Marie Henderson was such an agreeable little creature. Marie had not been quick about books. Indeed, Hester remembered now that the teachers had considered her dull. "But we cannot all be brilliant," said Hester to herself as she went her way.

It was wonderful how much one could hear when her ear is open for news. On the way to take the trolley, Hester met Edith Rank who was on her way to the station. Edith had graduated at the High School the spring before.

"Mame Welch is going away and I promised to see her before she goes. She's going to Illinois to spend the summer. Her Aunt Alice is going with her."

There were a few words more. Then Edith continued.

"I planned to go to see you when you came home, but Grandma Rank has been ill for several weeks and mother went to be with her. I've had charge of the house; but father takes his vacation to-morrow and we'll set off at once for the farm. We're going to remain a month."

Then Edith made her farewells and went her way, leaving three crisp personals in Hester's possession. Not wishing to trust to her memory Hester jotted down her notes. She was just in time, for the car was turning the corner.

Mrs. Herron was at the Country Club. Hester found her busied with decorators and caterers. Mrs. Herron had her own ideas as to the arrangement of draperies and flowers. Whether her taste was garish and crude was a disputed point; but the florist was always in despair when he tried to work with her. If he had dared, he would have refused her order.

She was big and handsome. Her clothes were very tight and her hair very extreme in

style. She had plenty of money, whose possession had been but the matter of a few years, and she was taking great pleasure in spending it freely. Though she rejoiced in her wealth, its possession had not made a cad of her. Her sympathy was quite in proportion to her purse; and her heart, to her physique. When she learned that Hester had come from the *Record*, she took her into a side room and gave her a list of names to copy. When this was done, she took her from reception hall to dining-room and drew her attention to any part of the decoration which might be called unique and original. She was good material to work with. She had been interviewed before and knew what would make a good article. When the rounds of the rooms had been made, she led Hester to an alcove.

“You’re tired out. I noticed the instant you came in that you were excited. The work is new to you? Well, do not make the mistake that all beginners do and feel that you must be everywhere and do everything in a few minutes. Sit there and rest and get cool, I’ll have one of the men bring you a glass of iced tea.”

If all interviewing were like this, Hester decided it would be the most delightful work in the world. She did not like to call it work. It seemed more a pastime; first, that delightful call on Marie, and then this.

She was quite satisfied with herself and the world and newspaper work—except the six dollars per week. That did not vex her as much as it might have some girls. She intended to have that increased very soon. No doubt when Mr. MacMurray saw how well she did the work, he would triple her salary.

It was almost twelve o'clock when she reached the office. Bateman was absent. Blinn sat at his machine thumping away at a rapid rate, with his eyes on his notes and a pipe between his lips.

Hester spread out her notes and was about to begin her report when Blinn saw her. He removed his pipe. "It's almost twelve; I wouldn't start that now. Do like the rest, 'Drei und zwanzig—geh.' "

"What is that?" asked Hester. "I didn't understand."

"Twenty-three—get. That's what it is in

unvarnished English. Being literary people, we eschew the common vernacular called slang. When we must express ourselves in that way, we take to a foreign tongue. Go home, feed, and return rested."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Blinn. I presumed that I was expected to hand in the report before I went home."

"Nixy—press doesn't close until three. Let me give you some good newspaper advice. Don't presume anything, and don't do a single thing that the chief doesn't tell you to. I've been on newspapers for twenty-three years, and I know a thing or two."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Blinn," said Hester. She did not know whether to take him seriously. She concluded, however, that she would go home for dinner. She would have plenty of time to write her article when she came back. The account of Mrs. Herron's dinner would be held back until the issue of the next day. Hester was a little suspicious that this Mr. Blinn was something of a wag. He had been so respectful, so deferential, when she had seen the chief talking to him the previous day. He

could use the typewriter. She was sure of that, for his fingers were moving so fast over the keys that they were scarcely distinguishable.

The road home was longer than usual that day. So it seemed to Hester; yet she walked it in less time than ever before. Her feet fairly flew. She wished to tell Debby Alden all that had happened during the morning.

Dinner was ready. Debby would not let Hester tell her tale until she was at the table. It took no mind-reader to know that the girl was excited, fairly bubbling over with enthusiasm.

“It isn’t at all unpleasant, Aunt Debby. You know the newspaper stories we read about how reporters were treated. They are all just stories. Nothing could be lovelier than calling on people and having them tell you about their parties.”

“Remember, Hester Alden has had but a half-day’s experience.”

“It has begun well. I was surprised at Marie Henderson. I never knew her very well at school. She never went with our set. This

morning she was lovely and said she would dearly love to do literary work, but she didn't think she could for she wasn't so bright as I."

"Remember the grain of salt, Hester. We need it to digest some people's flowery speeches."

"It wasn't mere flattery, Aunt Debby. Marie was dull in school. All the girls knew it and the teachers, too. She's improved. I suppose she's nicer because she's older," said Hester in good faith.

While their conversation was being carried on, Marie Henderson was confiding to her dearest friend, "Hester Alden was here this morning. She used to be really nice—unpretentious and plain you know; but she's been away to school and now is doing literary work. She's so conceited and unbearable. She was just bubbling over with her own importance."

"Working on the *Record!*!" exclaimed Marie's bosom friend. "What is she working for? Does she have to work?"

That view of the case had not presented itself to Marie. Like many another person, young and old, she gave forth her own impres-

sions as substantiated statements. "I suppose she does. You know, of course, that she is not Miss Debby Alden's niece at all, but just a beggar child that Miss Debby felt sorry for and took care of. I suppose Miss Debby thinks she has done her duty and that Hester is old enough to take care of herself."

The girl had not heard the story of Hester Alden's life. She listened eagerly while Marie related the story as she had heard it, which was far from the correct one. It seemed as though it could never be forgotten. There was always some one who was eager to bear it to the ears of those who had not heard.

Hester was happy in knowing nothing about this. She told Miss Debby all that had taken place during the morning. Then it was time to return to the office. The hot, unshaded road and streets were not pleasant in the midday sun. Hester, for the first time, fully appreciated the great cool living-room shaded by the outspreading branches of chestnut and beech.

Both Mr. Blinn and Mr. Bateman were busy at work when Hester entered the office. The door of the private room stood open and she

caught a glimpse of the editor-in-chief with a heap of papers before him.

Hester took her place and began work. Marie Henderson had told her a great deal about the party. One hundred words seemed so little. Hester labored under the impression that managing editors wished as much as they could get. If one hundred words would be good, five hundred would be five times better.

She wrote rapidly. Her mind was quick and for a girl of her age, her vocabulary was excellent. There were several hundred words when she had finished. She took the paper into the editor's room and laid it on his desk and came back without a word. She had seen the men do this. It seemed to be the custom of the office.

Then she began on the personals. She was quite confident about this line of work, for she had written most of the personals for the *Mirror* and the managing editor had said she had done well. Hester was a generous-minded girl who liked to write kind things. She could not have been critical with her pen had she tried.

Her first personal read, "Miss Edith Rank, the beautiful and accomplished daughter of

Dr. Alfred Rank, will leave to-day for an extended visit to their delightful country home at Ardmore."

"Miss Alice Jennings, the popular leader of the younger set, to the delight of her friends, has returned from Ocean Beach."

She had progressed so far when the managing editor came from his office and directly to her desk.

"How many words were written up for that party out on North Street?" he asked. His eyes glowered at her from beneath his bushy brows.

"One hundred," said Hester. Her voice did not falter. She had never been afraid of any one in her life and had no thought of being.

"Then make it one hundred. You've five times that amount here now." He threw the papers on her desk and went back to his work.

Hester's face flushed and her eyes filled with tears. She looked up quickly to see if the others had heard and were pitying her. But they were absorbed in work and were paying no attention to her.

She had in all fifteen personals. On these

she put her best efforts, using the best chosen adjectives and having rhetorical sentences that were quite imposing. When she had finished these, she laid them aside until she had cut the account of the party to the required length. She learned one thing by doing this; it is easier to write a short article than to cut a long one until it is short. Her making the account right caused her more thought and work than the first writing had done.

It was half-past two when she had finished. She had seen the boy from the press room come again and again for "copy." She had yet to learn that one slow person may keep an entire pressroom waiting.

She took her papers into the inner office and returned. There was nothing to do but the account of the dinner to be given by Mrs. Heron. She could not begin that at once for her fingers were cramped. She had written continuously for almost two hours. It was a long time to her, for her previous efforts had been interrupted every few minutes. She took up a magazine and looked it over. In a few minutes the chief came out and handed papers

to Miss Maynard with a few words of explanation. She nodded, took his papers, removed her own from the machine and began work on what the chief had given her. The man himself went back to his work, saying as he passed Hester's desk, "Miss Maynard will explain that stuff."

After Miss Maynard had finished her copy, she called Hester to her. There lay Hester's personals. Miss Maynard had retouched them.

"You never use adjectives in that kind of work. A news item is merely a statement—nothing more. The shorter and crisper it is, the better. Look over what you have written and compare them with mine. To-morrow you'll be able to write them as Mr. MacMurray wishes them."

She was kind and gracious about the correction, but nevertheless Hester's spirit went down below zero in her emotional thermometer. But she had determination. She would not give up, and she would profit by the corrections.

Miss Maynard spoke again as Hester moved away from her desk. "This is nothing new. Every new reporter must be taught the same

thing. You must not feel that you are the only one. We have all gone through with it."

Hester smiled back at her. "Thank you, Miss Maynard. No one could be kinder about it than you have been. I'll remember about the adjectives when I write to-morrow."

Hester examined her corrected copy. It was a mere statement. "Miss Alice Jennings has returned from Ocean Beach. Miss Edith Rank leaves to-day for Ardmore, where she will remain for the summer."

There was nothing beautiful and accomplished about it. It was plain, unvarnished, after the manner of newspaper offices.

## CHAPTER VII

THE attorneys, Hintner and Hendig, began work at once upon the claim against the Alden estate. They had communicated with Conrad and Westerleigh and had had a view of the papers presented. Hintner and Hendig were not tricksters, but long years of experience with many who were had opened their mind's eye to all possibilities of underhand games.

They examined the marriage certificate, took the name of the town, date, witness, and the justice of the peace. They held off any settlement until they had their side of the case ready to present. The marriage had taken place in one of the southwestern territories, just previous to its admission as a State. The name of the bride was on the certificate as Alice Harpster, and the town was Silver City. The name, "city," however, was a suggestion of a hope that it might be that. It was then, and still continued to be, a mining town of only a few

hundred people. In the earlier history, this region had given good prospect of being the richest silver section in the world. Miners had come by the hundreds. It was supposed that this influx had borne with it Ezra Alden, who had grown weary of the monotony of ranch life in Texas.

The band of speculators came and went. Only a few found soil worth working. Ezra Alden had remained for some time. Just how long, it was impossible to discover from those who knew. His widow and daughter, acting under the advice of their attorneys, had nothing to say on the subject, except to refer to Conrad and Westerleigh any curious-minded persons who asked for information.

Hintner and Hendig began a correspondence with people in Silver City. After several weeks the unsatisfactory report came back that there had been a William Stokes, Justice of the Peace, but he had died ten years before. He had had no family and no one knew whether he kept any records. The county records could give no information, for there had been no marriage license law, and no record of marriages; for,

during those years previous to its admission as a State, the population had been a moving one, and permitted of no stability of law. There had been a family of Harpsters there. A number of people in Silver City had remembered them. Old man Harpster had come there with his wife and several small children. He had been killed in a riot. His widow had then opened a boarding-house and earned a living for herself and children. She had been dead some years. The eldest daughter had married. No one in Silver City could remember the man's name; a tall, fine-looking person who might have passed as a professional man. He was not a miner. That had been many years before. No one could remember the particulars.

The Silver City cemetery had a grave marked with the name of Ezra Alden. Only one or two of the oldest characters of the settlement could remember him. The writer had heard that he had boarded with the "Widow Harpster" and died there. He had left a little piece of land which he believed had silver in it. This he had left to the widow in payment of the care she had given him.

That was all the letter contained. There was enough in it, however, to justify the attorneys in proceeding further. They could easily see how this "Mrs. Ezra Alden" might have secured the letters and the pictures of Debby Alden. They were so confident that their client was the victim of a scheme, that Horace Hinter, the senior member of the firm, decided to go to Silver City at once and investigate.

Miss Debby was called in to hear the plan.

"It promises very well," she said, "but I am afraid your expenses and your fee will be worth more than Ezra's half."

"As you look at it, it might," he said. He wondered if she were ignorant of the talk in the village. He himself had been studying the State geologist's report and knew that there was something more than mere talk in this. He remembered then that Debby Alden had been away for more than a year. Perhaps she did not know. He would not tell her, then, while the matter was yet in an unsettled state. He laughed at her uneasiness.

"Do not allow the money matter to trouble your economical soul, Miss Debby. I'm will-

ing to take my fee and expenses out in bricks—bricks without straw, too."

Miss Debby thought his expression peculiar—nothing more. She did not suspect the truth which lay, like the bricks, under the surface.

Horace Hintner was thorough in investigation. He did not follow out one line blindly and exclude all other suggestions. He had heard Miss Debby's story in detail. He had ferretted out what he could from Conrad and Westerleigh. He had visited the hotel register to see from what place this plaintiff and her daughter had registered.

"I wish I might talk with your niece," he said at last. "She was at home, you tell me, when these people called."

"Hester knows nothing. She does not understand people. You must remember that she is only a child. You'll find nothing from her except what I have already told you," said Miss Debby.

"Perhaps not, yet I would like to talk with her. Will you ask her to come in for a few moments on her way from the *Record* office? Do not tell her why I wish her. If I can get

her to tell me the story unconsciously, I may find something which has escaped even your keen eye, Miss Alden."

"I do not doubt it," she said. "I confess I am dull about many matters. I like to take people for what they appear to be."

She arose to leave. As she came to the door, she paused and turned to her legal adviser. "Ezra, they tell me, has been dead fifteen years. Why then did this woman wait so long to make herself known? She had the letters and my address all that time. I cannot understand why she did not write me of his death and why she did not let me know that I had a niece who bore my own name. I cannot understand why she waited until this time."

"She says the letters were mislaid for years. She could not find them. That may be as it is. I do not say that she is telling what is not true, but I do know that the present time was propitious. The tale of the bricks again, Miss Debby." He smiled at her look of bewilderment. "You do not understand me. I am not using classical allusions, I assure you. My language is the business vernacular of the

twentieth century and pertinent to the case in hand. I will explain when the time is ripe for explanation. Meanwhile, you will send Hester to see me, Miss Alden?"

He held open the door and bowed her out. Even a busy man had time for courtesies for Miss Alden. There was that in her bearing, strong in spite of its being unconscious, which made courtesy her due, and none refused to pay it to her.

It was not the financial side of the question alone which touched Debby Alden. Family meant much to her. The ties of blood were more to her than name. She had scarcely known this elder brother of hers, yet because he was an Alden, her heart was tender toward him. She loved him because the same blood was in their veins and they bore the same name. She had an inherited respect for family ties. Kin meant much to her. She would have welcomed Ezra's wife and daughter with open arms, had she been quite sure of them. It was not the lack of outward proof which held her aloof. She had met and talked with the girl, Deborah. Debby Alden had seen in her no

trace of the Aldens. Debby's heart had not warmed to her as it would have warmed to one of her own kin.

"I have a feeling that she is not our own," Debby told herself again and again. "I know my heart would have warmed to her had she been Ezra's daughter; but I didn't have that feeling at all."

These were the things—more than the money—which troubled Debby's heart. She knew that Ezra was dead and she was the last of the Palmer-Alden family. The Alden name would soon be but a memory in the valley which their ancestors had settled. Debby Alden with her traditions and training looked upon this as a calamity—a family name to become extinct—a memory, when it should be a living force.

Miss Debby told Hester of the request Mr. Hintner had made. The same afternoon after her work at the *Record* office was finished, Hester stopped in at the office of the attorney. She had been working now for two weeks in the newspaper office. She had been taught a great deal in those few days and had experiences which were really worth while. Not the least

of these was that muscles become very tired and that sitting at a desk and writing for several hours at a time is not quite as easy as it looks. For the first time in her life, Hester had learned what it is to be "fagged" in body and mind. She had not realized what the term meant, although she had heard it innumerable times. While in the High School, she had heard Miss Warde declare herself "fagged" and now and then the Hall teachers at the Seminary had expressed themselves so.

"I'm sorry for them if they were compelled to work after they felt like this," said Hester to herself as she mounted the stairs. This being tired was not strenuous enough to hurt her physically, while it was helping her in more ways than one. She could appreciate the feelings of the girls who stood all day behind counters or kept the keys of a typewriter going at high speed. Her own experience had enlarged her understanding and awakened her sympathies.

Mr. Hintner welcomed Hester cordially. His manner lost its professional air. He was just a cordial family friend who was pleased to see

Hester after the absence of almost a year. He was so tactful and gracious that Hester never suspected that he was talking with her for any business purpose. He asked her concerning her school life and regretted that the flood prevented the festivities of commencement week.

"Yet, it was an experience after all," he said. "Commencements may be had once a year. They are really very commonplace affairs, but a flood is something unusual. It is an experience worth while. Yet you seem rather fortunate in having unusual experiences. Aunt Debby told me of your callers of several weeks ago. Were you frightened?"

"For a while. I thought from their conduct that they were crazy, perhaps had escaped from some place."

The subject was thus introduced and Mr. Hintner, by judicious questions, led Hester to tell of all that had occurred that day. Miss Debby had been correct in her statement. He could get nothing new from this story, although Hester had told it all.

"Have you ever talked with this woman or seen her since?" he asked. He put the ques-

tion without any definite reason. Like many another one, he found that which he was not counting upon and which he had not counted as worth while was the most important factor after all.

"I caught a glimpse of her once," said Hester. "I go out to the Country Club when the ladies give dinners or receptions and get the items for the paper. One day I got off where the car turns the corner near the park. She was standing there talking to Jim Bates. When she saw me she walked away and took the car for town. It was just coming in. She acted as though she did not wish me to see her talking with Mr. Bates."

"Mr. Bates," repeated the attorney. "The name is new to me. Does he live here?"

"I think not. Indeed I am sure he does not. From what I heard in the station at Tyrone, he is a lumberman and has big contracts in the south."

"You met him then? Perhaps some of your family know him. Did your Aunt Debby meet him?"

"No, I did not mention his name to Aunt

Debby." Hester's face flushed. The subject brought up something she was always trying to forget: that she had people who did not care to claim her, and who had left her to a stranger to rear.

The attorney observed the flush which overspread the girl's face and the downcast eyes which meant shame of some kind.

He looked at her steadily. When Hester raised her eyes, she met his direct look.

"I shall tell you," she said simply. "You know more of the matter than I do—that is, about me and my people. Aunt Debby told me so, that I was to come to you if anything should happen to her."

The attorney nodded in affirmation.

"They talked of me—or some one that looked like me. I did not tell Aunt Debby. There was no use of her knowing, and she might worry about it."

"You did right, but don't worry about it yourself, Hester. Be a sensible girl and put from your mind things which have passed, and do not think of anything worrisome for the future. It is going to be a very happy future for

you and Miss Alden if I calculate correctly, and I have the reputation of having sound judgment. I can tell you this much, Hester, whom-ever you look like or by birth belong to, you are legally Miss Debby Alden's. No one can separate you without you both consent. So put any fear of that kind far from your mind."

It was a relief to Hester. In spite of her light-heartedness, there were times when she dreaded the sight of a stranger, fearing always that he might come to claim her.

"There would be no use in repeating this to Miss Alden," said Mr. Hintner. "It might be different with me, I will not worry." He smiled at Hester to reassure her, and continued, "It might help me greatly to know every detail of that conversation; where you first saw the men, and every word they said. Can you tell me that, Hester?"

"If it will help you," she said. "I have tried not to think of it, and I do not like to talk of it, but I will tell you."

She began a recital of her experience that day in the train and how her attention had been attracted to overhearing part of the conversa-

tion between the men. She told also of the talk at the station at Tyrone.

"That is how I knew the man's name," she said. "The fat, jolly-looking man who sat outside the window said he had come up in the train with Jim Bates."

"You do not think your fat, jolly-looking man knew that you overheard what he was talking about?" asked Mr. Hintner.

"I do not think so. Don't you think that he would have stopped if he had? I do not think that he would wish a stranger to hear." She paused an instant and then looked up at the attorney with a look of concern in her eyes. "I suppose I should not have listened, but at first I could not move away. Then I thought the conversation concerned me, and that I should know. Then I did not think at all. I just listened and listened. Perhaps I wasn't honorable. I'm sure Aunt Debby would think I was not."

"The circumstances were peculiar," said Mr. Hintner. He leaned forward that he might rest his elbow on his desk. He pressed his upturned palm against his eyes to shut out the

light, and for a few moments thought hard. This was his position when his mind was keen on a subject. He shut from sight and sound all about him. Of one thing he was assured, that the fat, jolly-looking man who sat outside the window and related his romantic story had done so with the express purpose of having Hester overhear. He wished her to know, and believed that she would relate it to Miss Debby. He had not counted on the girl's love and faithfulness for her foster-aunt. Mr. Hintner had no way of knowing how much of the story was true. He was inclined to believe that it was a fairy-tale from beginning to end. For what purpose it had been created, he could not tell. Of one thing he was certain; the little touch about the disconsolate father's being a man of standing and of means had been given to influence Hester in his favor and to make her willing to go with him should he come to claim her.

“Why did they wish to claim her?” Horace Hintner asked himself. “Why, too, had the money-loving old screw of Abner Stout wanted to claim her?”

There was some reason which both the fat, jolly man and Abner knew. There must be a financial reason, or Abner would not have been interested.

Horace Hintner decided that, as soon as he had settled the controversy concerning the Alden estate, he would follow up this affair with Abner Stout and find out what he knew concerning Hester, and why he had sought to claim her. He would offer to pay him. Abner would give the information for money.

This new matter of which Hester had told him, however, had nothing to do with the claim made by the woman who called herself Mrs. Alden. It was by chance that they presented themselves at the same time. The attorney reached these conclusions. Then he raised his head and addressed Hester.

“You didn’t see this man, Bates, then, after you left the train at Tyrone?”

“Only when I saw him down in the ravine the day I went over to Mary Bowerman’s.” Hester laughed when she thought of it. She could picture herself sitting there on the log, framed in by the branches and the leaves of

the alder, looking out with frightened eyes, watching the men. She laughed again. It was a very ridiculous plight to tell of, and she did not like to tell Mr. Hintner.

"I must have looked like a chipmunk, sitting there on the log. You've seen how chipmunks act when they're startled and look about them."

"I've seen them so many a time. Were you startled?" The attorney tried not to show his eagerness. He wanted to know what James Bates was doing up in the ravine and on the hill.

"There were two other men with him. I had sat down for a moment to—to—think over some matters. Then I heard voices and the crackling of bushes. I was afraid to go on and meet strangers—a tramp perhaps. I'm dreadfully afraid of tramps. I always was."

"And was it?"

"No, it was the same Mr. Bates whom I had seen in the train. There were two gentlemen with him, but the other man did all the talking—most of it."

"By the other man, you mean Mr. Bates?" asked Mr. Hintner.

"Yes," said Hester. Mr. Hintner buried his head in his hands for a few moments. He knew what was going on in town. He knew, as did almost every one else, that the fall previous a party of geologists had spent weeks in the hills and mountains and had made reports of the geological conditions. It was reported that they had found a vein of fire-clay on the ridge to the west of town—fully five miles from any land owned by Miss Alden. This vein, however, had proved to be shallow, and though, while it contained all the parts which made fire-brick, there had not been a sufficient quantity to warrant the investment of money to build the works. This talk was the common property of the town. Perhaps there had been some reports which were not given to the public.

Hester unconsciously had given a new idea to Mr. Hintner. He raised his head and laughed lightly. He did not wish the child to consider the matter too seriously. There was no need of her bearing the burden of the matter.

"You discriminate, Hester," he said. "I do not know whether you do so purposely, or

whether the different words slipped out unconsciously. You said two gentlemen and that man. What was the difference, or was there one?"

The question brought a smile to Hester's face. She was conscious for the first time that she had used the words and had used them because she had felt a difference between Jim Bates and the men with whom he had been talking.

"There was a difference. The strangers looked like gentlemen, and Mr. Bates—" She paused. She could not put the difference into words, "—was not just like them. I cannot tell just in what way, but there was a difference."

Mr. Hintner was satisfied with the answer. He asked the date of the meeting. She was able to tell him exactly, for she remembered the day of the month when she and Aunt Debby had come home. It was easy to fix it from that. Mr. Hintner did not trust his memory with this data, but took down notes in a convenient little book.

"Did you form any idea as to what these men

were talking about?" he asked. Hester's face flushed.

"I heard some of their words, but I could not understand. They were talking of matters of which I was ignorant."

"I do not know that you need blush for that," said Mr. Hintner kindly. "A young girl is not supposed to know the technicalities of business or law. Can you remember any of their words? I may be able to fill in the gaps."

Hester's memory was retentive. She remembered the greater part of what she heard. "Mr. Bates seemed to be insisting that they need not take his word. It was a business proposition and they could read the report for themselves. Then there was something about three months and an option and one hundred thousand."

Mr. Hintner gave a sigh of relief. It was clear to him now why the fat, jolly-looking man wished Hester to hear his story. They meant to make Miss Debby and Hester worry some before they sprung their scheme on them. Mr. Hintner, however, could see no connection between the piece of business and the claim brought against the Alden estate.

"All the vultures have smelt the carcass," he said aloud.

"I beg your pardon, I did not understand," said Hester.

"I was talking to myself, Hester. A very bad habit for any one. I beg your pardon. I'm beginning to understand your new friends."

"They're no friends of mine," said Hester.

"A mere expression." His lightness was a mere by-play to keep Hester from placing too much weight on his questions or giving too much thought to her answers. He wanted spontaneity from her. "I wonder what report your friend Mr. Bates referred to? You didn't happen to hear, Hester?"

"No, he had it in his hand. It was a printed report of some kind. He was about to show it to the strangers, but they waved it aside."

"I would like to get a glimpse of it. It may be of little importance, though. Perhaps nothing more than some newspaper article—a paid-for advertisement put up among the news articles."

"It was a geologist's report," said Hester with great unconcern. Mr. Hintner had spoken

in an indifferent fashion as though the report was of little importance, and Hester's mind had unconsciously assumed a similar expression.

"He must have thrown it aside. I found it scattered about when I came back from Mary Bowerman's. I picked up several pages and tried to read it. It was nothing but geological reports. It wasn't anything interesting."

"Not interesting? I fancied you might be of a scientific turn of mind. Now a boy would have carried those papers home and treasured them. I'll wager you that a boy would have read every word printed in them. At least, he would have carried them home."

"Even a girl can do so much," replied Hester brightly. "I did that, but I did not treasure them. Boys would not, either, if they were compelled to keep house. They would know how much litter collects. I carried the report home and read a little on the way. It was something about iron, lime and soda. I remember those names because they are common. There were others, too, in the list, but I have forgotten them. They were new names to me."

"Did you save it or did it make too much litter?"

"No, Mr. Hintner, I used it to start the fire in the range," said Hester.

## CHAPTER VIII

HESTER ALDEN had been a wage-earner for four weeks. Each Saturday afternoon during that time, she had carried home six dollars and given it to her Aunt Debby.

“It’s to be used for what we need to eat, Aunt Debby,” she said. Debby made no response, but took the money and at the end of the month deposited the full amount in the local bank in Hester’s name. Hester knew nothing of this. She felt that she was providing the necessities for them both, and rejoiced that she was able to do it. Holding a position was not all unalloyed pleasure. There were many good times that Hester was compelled to give up. Mary Bowerman had completed her plans for a camping-party. Twelve girls in company with Miss Kenson and a woman to do the cooking were to go into camp the first week in August. Hester longed to be with them, but that was impossible. There were picnics and excursions.

The only part that Hester could take was to report them.

Jane was quite overcome with sympathy. She could not understand Hester's motive for working. Jane had planned an excursion to the ice-cave with a lunch and a bonfire in the evening.

"You know I'd dearly love to go," said Hester, "but when one's working, one cannot get off and go when one pleases."

"Don't you think, Hester, that you're too ambitious? You know Miss Debby would dearly love to have you with her all the time, and since you are working, she must go alone. Don't you think you're too ambitious?"

Hester shook her head. "You don't understand and I can't explain; but I must not be idle. I simply cannot be idle."

"I love it," said Jane. The dimples came and went in her cheeks. Her eyes overflowed with good humor. "I'm never sure whether I am lazier than other girls or just more frank in expressing myself. But I just adore being idle, doing nothing but what I wish to do. I would like to bake, if our cook would let me in

the kitchen, but she will not, so I gave that up. I potter all day long. Sometimes I write letters, and I read to grandma and go on errands and then run in to see you and Mary and try some new music and just put in a good long day as happy as a lark, never doing a thing but amuse myself."

The girls were sitting on the bench under the apple-tree. From their position, they could get a view of the road almost to Bowerman's gate.

"Here comes Mary," said Jane. "She's making herself a hat. All the girls do something but 'yours truly,' and she's just lazy."

Hester smiled at Jane. Who could help it? She was so good-natured and droll. She admired every one and everything.

Mary came in at the gate and seated herself on the grass. She began plucking the clover tops and casting them aside.

"I've made myself a duck of a hat," she said. "I made over my Milan, turned it up at the side and put a bow on it, and a great big chou of Milan."

"It must be pretty," said Jane. "Show it

to me if I stop on my way home? I got a new one at Mrs. Dunn's."

"I saw it one day. Don't you remember? I don't think it's a bit becoming. It's too little in the crown, and you know, Jane, that with your broad, fat face, you ought to wear a small hat."

Jane laughed. Had Mary made any other kind of remark, Jane would have been surprised. The dimples came and went. "Am I broad and fat?" she said good-humoredly. "You are tall and slender. So I say, but if I wished to be disagreeable, I might say, long and lank, or skinny and tall. It's all the way you say it, Mary."

"Well, isn't your face broad and fat?"

"Maybe father calls it something else," she laughed again. If her feelings had been touched, she did not show it in voice or manner. There was a moment's silence and then Jane continued. "Mary, you should break yourself of one little habit. We who know you and have known you all your life do not mind it—much. We know that you're really very bright and kind—underneath—but strangers do

not. They'll think you as acid as your tongue. Why don't you cultivate the habit of making people feel at their best instead of at their worst, and break yourself of saying such sharp, sarcastic things?"

Mary's face flushed. "I'll do nothing of the sort. I don't care whether people like me or not. I'm not going around grinning at people and telling them that they're tall and slender when they're stalky and fat. I despise a softie. I thank you, I have opinions of my own and I intend expressing them."

Hester raised her hands in mock alarm. She dreaded Mary's outbursts and was sorry that Jane had called one forth. "I'm frightened to death, Mary," she said. "I'm afraid of my head. In such a gust as that it might fly off suddenly." She smiled at her angry friend. "I shouldn't like to lose my head, Mary. It's all I have, and almost every day I use it."

"Do you? I would never have suspected it," was the reply. Jane came to the rescue. She had caused the storm; she would do what she could to lull it.

"Newspaper work requires a head," she said.

"I've heard it said that a head is one of the essentials."

"For what? To see with?" said Mary.

"Mary, do please be good-natured. You're so nice when you are. You're like the little girl in the story book. When you're good, you're very good indeed, but when you're bad, you're horrid."

"If I'm that, I'd better go home," said Mary.

"No, I'll go," said Jane. "I'm what is called a peace-breaker. I make a remark, and war clamors about my ears." She did not arise, however. Mary's vexation did not annoy her in the least. She had become accustomed to it. They had had enough of it, however. She turned to Hester.

"I should think you'd feel like a millionaire," she said. "You've had a salary for six weeks. What are you going to do with it?"

"I know what I'd do with it!" cried Mary. "I know what I shall do with the first money I earn. I shall get a big hat covered with plumes. There's something elegant about a plume. And I'll have a dress lined with silk and I'll have a train. I abominate the sight of a woman going

about in a skirt to her shoe-tops. There's nothing graceful about it."

"Particularly if she's long and lank," said Jane meekly. There was a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, however. Hester shook her head in warning.

"I'd have something handsome—a thick soft silk with spangles."

"I wouldn't," said Jane. "I know what I'd have. I'd have a soft silk mull with big pink roses and green leaves scattered over it. I'd have it made with little frills to the waist and frills on the sleeve. I'd wear a big flopping picture hat covered with roses. I'd look like a—"

"Hogshead," said Mary before Jane could finish her simile. Then they both laughed and the storm was over.

"I intended saying that I'd look like a dream," said Jane, "but perhaps it would have been an unpleasant dream—a nightmare."

As to what they would do if they had money of their own! Mary and Jane threshed the subject thoroughly. They did not notice that Hester said nothing concerning the way her earnings should be spent.

"When I was a very little girl," said Hester at last and she spoke as though it had been an incident of mediæval history. "When I was a very little girl I used to dream of what I would do if I ever had fifty dollars. I didn't know how much fifty dollars was—I was so little. I intended to board at that big hotel on Water Street—the one that used to have a park about it. I was going to board there for a month. I could see myself promenading through the park with a long train trailing after me."

"My dream was to buy raisins," said Jane. "Very early in life, I decided that when I grew up and could do just as I pleased I would buy raisins by the barrel and eat all I could, and dispense the others with lavish hand."

Mary looked sarcastic. She had no tolerance for such childish dreams. "Neither raisins nor boarding at a hotel for a month would satisfy me," she said. "I always intended to be the lady of the Manor and own everything, all the land and houses. When people came to me for employment or for help, I would have them

kneel and kiss my hand as the serfs did in feudal times in England."

The girls laughed with her. Yet an unpleasant feeling lingered with them. In this expression of her ambitions, Mary had shown, perhaps, more of her real nature than she was aware.

Hester had already fallen into the regular routine of the office. She had learned to follow her assignments as directed, and not to use too many of her original ideas. The editor had impressed her with the fact that in a daily paper people looked for facts and not elaborate writing; and the more ungarnished the facts, the more acceptable. When she entered upon her seventh week of work, Mr. Blinn was called away for a few days, and a change was made in the regular assignments. Bateman had been doing the regular meeting of a Woman's Club which met every Monday afternoon. The programme had as a feature a half-hour lecture on some subject of particular interest to women.

"Miss Alden, a minute, please," said the chief, as Hester came into the office Monday morning. She went into the private office and

stood waiting as was the custom of the office. Mr. MacMurray looked at her from beneath his shaggy brows. He had quite a fierce appearance to those who did not understand him. Hester had learned that his frown was the worst of him. He looked critically at Hester and smiled at the idea of giving such a child any important work to do. The morning had suggested rain and Hester had worn a sailor suit of dark blue serge with an embroidered anchor on the sleeve. Her hair was hung in two long braids below her waist with crimson ribbons at each end and a great crimson butterfly bow where the braids began at the base of her head. She looked like a brilliant flower, or a butterfly; not like a girl who was working very hard to earn six dollars a week.

"I've given you the Woman's Club meeting for this afternoon," said Mr. MacMurray. "We always give them plenty of space. Write it up for all it is worth. I must show you how to take notes." He drew pencil and paper toward him and instructed her how writing one or two words would be the means of later re-

calling the substance of the thought if not the words.

"We cannot give a verbatim report. It would require a stenographer; besides it's better to get the meat of the talk and work it over. Some lectures sound well from the platform which would be simply atrocious if printed word for word. Get the ideas, don't misquote, and rewrite.

"The talk this afternoon will be on 'Art in the Home.' A Mrs. Hill is to give it. I don't know anything about her. She's a stranger to me. She may know a heap about her subject and she may know nothing at all. Make the best of it, whatever she gives."

There were a hundred members in the club. These with a few invited guests had assembled in the auditorium of the Club House when Hester entered. She stood an instant by the door and looked about her. The meeting appeared to be more of an exhibition of elegant clothes than anything else. The ladies wore elegant gowns. The elder ones were resplendent in soft grays and thin shimmering black lace and

nets; the younger women wore embroidered mulls, nets with real lace, and picture hats heavy with plumes or flowers. There was a movement of fans. To Hester standing aloof and looking on, the fans seemed like bright-winged butterflies. There was a soft swish of silk, low silvery laughs, then some one came up to Hester.

“Did you wish to see some one, my dear?” Hester heard the question and looked up into the face of a white-haired, dainty little lady in a soft gown of violet. She looked as dainty and fragrant and sweet as a violet.

“I am from the *Daily Record*,” said Hester. “I came to hear the talk on ‘Art in the Home.’ ”

“How lovely! I know you will enjoy it. I’m Mrs. Rossmann, the president of the Club. If you will come with me, I shall escort you to our reporter’s table. The weeklies never give us a full report. The *Record* is the only newspaper in the city that thinks we are worth while.” This was not said in a complaining fashion, but in a sweet gracious way which was charming. Hester’s mental comment was that

this new friend was almost as nice as her Aunt Debby, Mrs. Richards, or Helen Loraine.

Mrs. Rossman led Hester to the front of the room, where at the foot of the platform was placed a table and several chairs.

“Sit here, my dear,” said the lady, pulling out a chair for Hester. “You can hear every word here. I wish you would write a good report for us. I am sure every reader of the *Record* would enjoy all that Mrs. Hill has to tell us. If there is anything that you do not get clearly, come to me after the meeting. I shall see that you meet Mrs. Hill. She will make any matter clear to you.”

Hester thanked her heartily and took her place. As she sat at the desk, she faced the audience who were now finding seats. Hester's face grew crimson. She felt that every one was looking directly at her and wondering what she was doing there. She could not raise her eyes to meet that sea of faces. So she sat for some minutes with crimson cheeks and palpitating heart. At last she forced herself to look up. The women were interested in other matters. Not one of them was paying any attention to

the little reporter or looking in her direction. It was a relief to Hester and yet a prick to her pride. She was not the object of any one's attention after all.

After a few preliminaries, Mrs. Hill began the address on "Art in the Home." She was one of those public speakers whose talk sounds well, yet if read, would be found to be utterly lacking in what the newspaper men call meat. She was a woman of pleasing appearance. Her voice was rich and full. This was her stock-in-trade. There was a paucity of ideas in the half-hour talk.

Hester was conscious of this when she began to take notes. All was beautiful richly sounding words and nothing else. A great deal might have been made of the subject. There was quite enough material for several lectures. Miss Webster, the art teacher at the Seminary, had given talks on Art once a month. She had subdivided the subject into ten parts. Art in dress had been interesting to the girls. Her Art in decorations and furnishings of the home had far excelled that to which Hester was now listening.

She took what notes she could. When she went back to the office, however, there were but two pages of her notebook filled.

“Well?” Mr. MacMurray said interrogatively, as she passed his door. Hester knew what this meant. He wished to know the results of the lecture. She stepped within the private office.

“It—it—really was not very good,” she said. “It sounded very well while Mrs. Hill talked and the ladies applauded very heartily; but when one tried to write it, there were only words and not ideas.”

“Make the most of it you can,” he said. “Remember it is a reporter’s privilege to make things better, as long as there is no misquoting. Make the best of it. If you can add something along that line, do it.”

“I’ll make her say brighter things than she ever thought of,” said Hester. Mr. MacMurray restrained a smile. Hester’s manner of expression showed neither braggadocio nor conceit. It was enthusiasm; the joy that an artist on any line feels in carrying out his design.

Going to her desk, Hester wrote rapidly. She

took Mrs. Hill's few ideas and interspersed them with all she could remember from the talks which Miss Webster had given. The two fitted together nicely. Before lunch hour, Hester had written material enough to fill several columns. Then she laid aside her pencil with a sigh. She was tired. She did not realize that until the pencil had finished its task and was ready to be laid aside. She was hungry also. She would enjoy her dinner. She was conscious of having done something well. With this feeling of satisfaction, she placed her papers on the desk of the chief and went home to lunch.

Her second assignment for the day was not until late in the afternoon. Consequently she did not hurry back to the office. It was almost two o'clock when she came in, took up her pad and pencil and was about to set forth. Again Mr. MacMurray spoke to her.

"I thought you said there was no material in that Woman's Club meeting to work on."

"There wasn't," said Hester. "The whole subject, as it was presented there could have been written in less than five hundred words."

The chief lowered his shaggy brows. He shuffled some twenty sheets of paper in his hand. "You must have three thousand here. It's good matter, too. Where did you get the material?"

"It is my own—" Hester hastened to explain. Then she stopped. "No, it is what I heard our teacher in Art give in one of her talks. The language is mine, but the ideas belong to Miss Webster."

"Well, fix it as you will. You and Miss Webster have given us a rather good article. There's nothing but meat in it; no padding. I wish you'd be more careful, however, about your paragraphs. You've learned your lesson about adjectives." His brows lowered.

"You might as well learn it all. If you step here, I'll show you about the heading. You can write your own doubles as well as I can. Hereafter write them. I'll cut them out if they do not suit me."

Hester's feeling went the way of the thermometer when the weather's hot. As she went down the steps, her feet barely touched them. Her head was in the air, her cheeks flushed and

her eyes brightened. The peculiar part of it was that she was not thinking of the salary at all, or that this good work might increase it. She was conscious only that she had really written something so well that as rigid a critic as Mr. MacMurray had lauded it. Aunt Debby would be pleased. Just to please her Aunt Debby was worth twenty dollars a week.

The following morning when Hester came in from her assignment, both Mr. Bateman and Mr. Blinn were in the office. One had just come in; the other was making ready to go out.

“There was a lady here to see you, Miss Alden,” said Mr. Bateman. “You’ll find her card on your desk, but her message she left verbally with me.”

Hester took up the card. “Mrs. H. Judson Hill,” was what she read. She looked up anxiously into Mr. Bateman’s face; Mr. Blinn read her look. “Grieve not, fair maid,” he said, “the dowager duchess, who but lately honored this sanctum with her presence, came not to destroy but to laud. She came to bring thee a robe of velvet and to put a ring upon thy finger. Would some one would see me thus.”

"Don't pay any attention to Blinn," said Mr. Bateman. "Surely, Miss Alden, you have been in this office long enough to know that nothing he says counts. Mrs. Hill came to thank you for the excellent account that you gave of her lecture yesterday. She bought several dozen copies—"

"Three thousand seven hundred and sixty-five," interposed Blinn. "She intends sending them marked with blue pencil to every one whose name she can spell and whose address she knows. We ran off a special edition."

"—to send to friends," continued Mr. Bateman, utterly ignoring Blinn's interruption. "She was delighted with your account. She says our paper is the only one that has ever reported her correctly."

"Really," cried Hester. "I'm very glad she is pleased."

"I read it," said Mr. Bateman. He moved back to his own desk and spoke slowly as though to himself. "I read it; I wonder if she said it all."

"I *made* her say it," said Hester.

"So I thought; to those who have no ideas

they must be given; but given in such a way that those who receive know not that they receive."

Blinn stopped in his work of sharpening pencils and whistled. "You are a precocious youth, Bateman. By the time you're grown up, what will you be?"

"I know what you'll be if you don't hurry. It's eleven now."

Mr. Blinn looked at the clock, seized his hat and hurried downstairs, improvising as he went.

"It was ever thus from childhood's day  
My leisure hours have sodden sunk.  
From social joys I'm forced away,  
To seek for thoughts in what is punk."

Hester laughed. At the foot of the stair, Mr. Blinn paused a moment. Then he began again:

"It was always thus from childhood's hour  
I've seen my fondest joys decay.  
I never had the time to talk  
But found I had no word to say."

## CHAPTER IX

EVER since Mr. MacMurray had spoken well of her work, Hester's air-castles had been growing more elaborate. On her way to and from the office she planned for the future. There was never a doubt in her mind that she would be a writer of renown. She could see herself in a handsomely furnished study with her table covered with manuscripts. She could see the pile of letters, all containing checks of no mean value, piled up near at hand. Her imagination took one great leap from the present to the far distant future without taking into consideration any of the hard steps between. It was very much as though a traveler in the valley saw himself on the hilltop without expecting to climb the slope or to receive many a stone-bruise by the way.

Although every evening found Hester tired, and made early retiring a necessity, she en-

joyed the work. She gave up picnics and parties without complaint.

Debby Alden on several occasions when her niece came home tired was tempted to declare that she should not go back to the work; but her judgment restrained her from giving way to her affection and keeping Hester from a broad wholesome development. Debby appreciated the unselfish motive which kept Hester at work. She saw, too, that the girl was learning more practical English than a year at school would teach her. Her handing over her few dollars each Saturday evening in a spirit of great helpfulness was teaching her a lesson which some can never learn: self-denial, and sacrifice for others. This was what gave pleasure to Hester. She was doing something for Aunt Debby. She did not suspect that every cent of the money she earned was put to her credit in the bank.

Hester's wage-earning brought her into contact with many people. She was learning to know people as they were and not as they appeared to be.

After her article on "Art in the Home,"

Hester Alden would have attempted anything in the line of writing. For days, however, there was nothing but routine work with no opportunity to show off one's brilliance. Everything was boiled down without adjective or dressing of any kind. The season was dull for any social affairs. The paper was made up principally of telegraph news and plate matter.

The Woman's Club held their last meeting for the summer in August. For the two months following they took a vacation. The last half-hour lecture was to be one really worth while. "Tuberculosis—Its Prevention and Cure." The members of the club were delighted with having secured a specialist on the subject. He was a Doctor Bridgeman of New York City, and had made his name famous in certain lines of medical work.

Hester had read something of his life. She admired him greatly, just as she would have admired any one who had accomplished anything worth while. Deep in her heart the girl was a hero worshiper. Like many another person older and wiser, she made a mistake in

taking it for granted that he who is great in one thing is great in all. She forgot that even famous people are human and have faults which are the mark of difference between the human and divine.

Much to Hester's delight, she was assigned to Doctor Bridgeman's lecture. No limitation had been put on her in regard to length. She was told simply to do the best she could. That pleased her most of all. She would take the lecture for all it was worth. Perhaps the famous man would call at the office and thank her for her fine report.

His lecture was easy to take. Every sentence meant something. As verbatim reports were never given in the *Record*, the reports put down only leaders—a word or part of a sentence which would recall the thought to mind and which the reporter would reproduce in his own language.

Hester took copious notes; but while doing so, her mind wandered a little from the subject. She was thinking not so much of what Dr. Bridgeman was saying, as she was of the best way to write it up later.

She returned to the office and wrote steadily until time to go home. There were almost thirty pages written in her clear, bold hand. She looked it over with a satisfied feeling, put it on the editor's desk, and went home.

She wondered if Dr. Bridgeman would come into the office to thank her as Mrs. Hill had done. She did not believe that he would. He had had so much newspaper praise and stood so high in his profession that the report in a little daily would mean nothing at all to him. No doubt the great man was so absorbed in his life work that he had no thought of laud or honor. His purpose would be to bring about some good for humanity. Applause would mean nothing at all to him.

Hester reasoned thus with herself. Yet in spite of her logic, she could not but hope that she would meet the great man face to face.

Mr. MacMurray said nothing at all about the article. There was neither praise nor criticism. It had appeared in the paper the day following the lecture and had been given the leading place on the page devoted to other than telegraphic news.

Wednesday morning Hester was assigned to a camping-party. Some of the younger people on Wilmot Avenue were going up on the shore of the lake to camp for several weeks. Hester was to get the names and any details which would make an interesting account. These young people like to see their names in print. Mr. MacMurray cautioned her not to omit one from the list.

Wilmot Avenue lies on the outer edge of town. It was the residence street on which was known as the Wilmot Addition. Hester made her visit and returned to the office. The door into Mr. MacMurray's room was closed. The chief was talking earnestly. Hester went on to her desk, drew up her papers, and began to write.

Mr. Blinn was at his desk but not busy. He was chuckling to himself as though he knew something exceedingly funny. Mr. Bateman came in, looked at the closed door, shook his head ominously and went to his desk. Blinn looked grave. "The man who does his very best gets most the kicks from all the rest," he said. "But cheer up, Bateman, if it's you.

A few hard knocks develop the man in you. Criticism is what develops. Hear, heed and—”

“Keep advice until you’re asked for it,” said Mr. Bateman rather sharply. “You may need the consolation and not I.”

Hester had completed one sentence. She paused with her pencil in the air, her head lifted and her ears alert.

“Any New York doctor who thought I gave out such rot as that would say I was fit for an asylum. It must be rectified—it’s got to be rectified—”

Then Mr. MacMurray’s voice interrupted. He spoke slowly. Hester could catch the sound of his voice but not his words. The chief was never loud. But the high-pitched angry voice again interrupted. The person was angry. He had evidently lost control of himself. Hester waited until she was sure that she recognized the voice. Dr. Bridgeman! Could it be possible that an educated gentleman of such standing as he had no more self-control! Hester’s idol worship went down in market value to far below par. In her own

thoughts, she had been claiming much for a man who could accomplish things. He was not being choice in the expressions he used. Hester's face flushed. Through fault of hers, Mr. MacMurray was bearing this. With a feeling that no one must bear the result of her action but herself, she arose and walked directly into the private office. Her head was held proudly, but two bright spots glowed on her cheeks.

The doctor was standing in the middle of the room with a copy of the *Record* in his hand. He was gesticulating wildly; his voice was pitched high. He looked very much like a badly-disciplined child to whom an external application of birch rod would have been beneficial. He had studied the article and had marked with red ink the expressions to which one could take exception.

“Twenty-eight mistakes—twenty-eight mistakes,” he bellowed forth. “Think of any man permitting twenty-eight mistakes in two columns of a paper. Why, the person who wrote this and the editor who let it pass is fit only for an asylum.”

Mr. MacMurray was leaning back in the chair. He showed no more feeling about Dr. Bridgeman's expressions than though they were a casual observation concerning the weather.

"Every one doesn't see matters from your point of view," he said slowly. "We write for an intelligent public and not for the medical fraternity. We have more right to use a word in its common rather than its technical sense. Our reporters are not doctors of medicine."

"I wrote that account," said Hester advancing. "What is wrong with it, Dr. Bridgeman?"

He did not lower his voice. He did not pay her the courtesy of a salutation.

"What is wrong with it? What isn't wrong with it?" He flaunted the paper in her face.

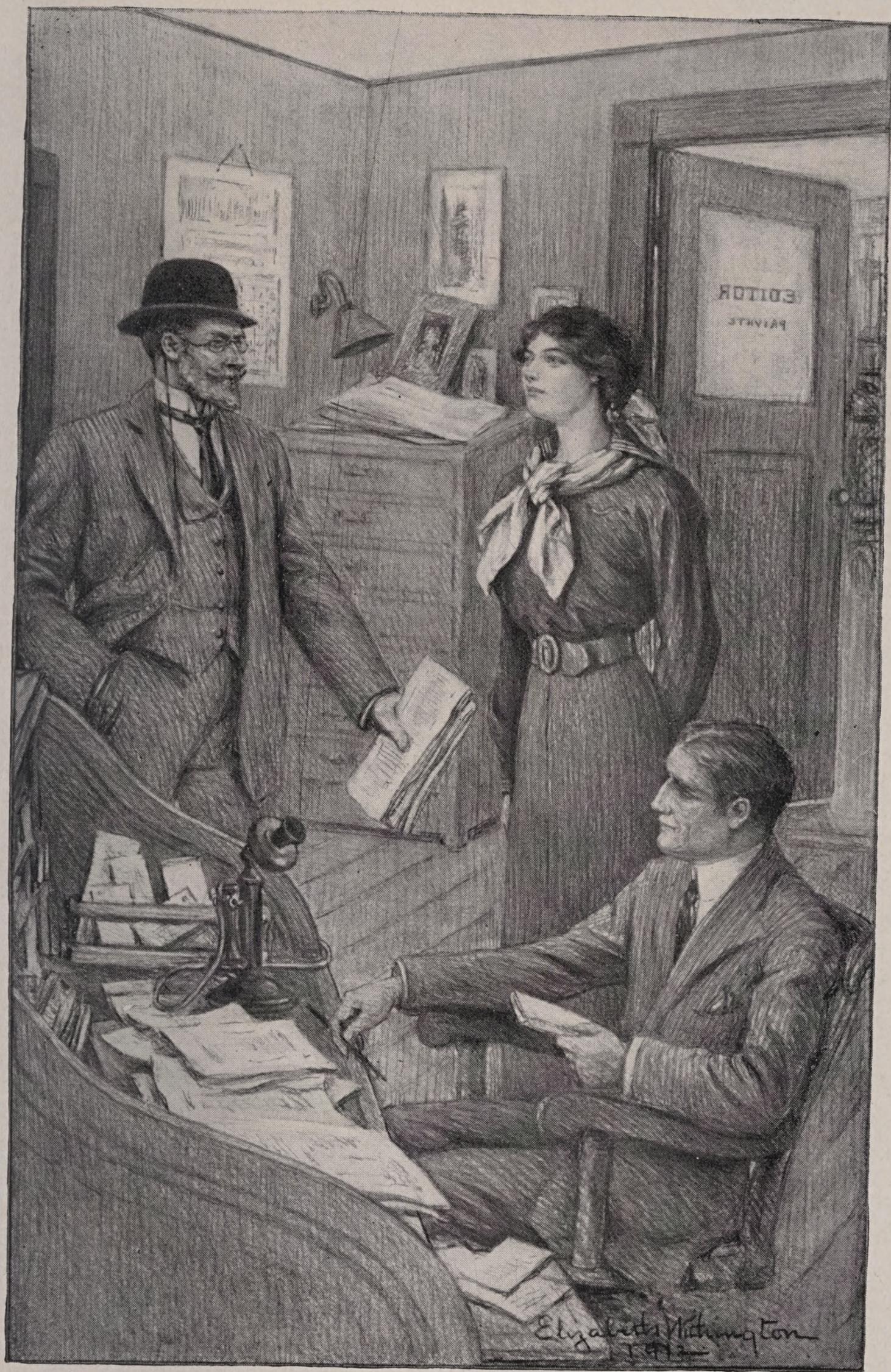
She took it from his hands and read it. "You have this marked," she said. "'There are four ways of transmitting tuberculosis: by inheritance, infection, inoculation, and ingestion.'"

"I didn't say there were four. Infection includes inoculation."

"But you said so. I remember quite distinctly. You said, 'There are four ways of transmitting,' and then you named them in the order that I have written them."

"I meant one to include the following. I said it parenthetically," he declared. His voice was a little lower now. He was rather surprised at the fearlessness of the girl. He had not believed that she would enter the office and claim the responsibility of the article. Hester was not bold; neither was she afraid. She defended herself just as she would have defended another, had the situation been changed. It was a mere act of justice to demand justice for herself as well as for another. She had had that idea bred in the bone from sixteen years' living with Debby Alden.

"You did not say it so," said Hester. "If you meant it so, your words gave a wrong impression." Mr. MacMurray turned his head aside. He was delighted. He had dealt with the young doctor before and knew what to expect. He was surprised at Hester's calm manner which he decided was courteous. Deciding



"I WROTE THAT ACCOUNT," SAID HESTER, ADVANCING. "WHAT IS  
WRONG WITH IT, DR. BRIDGMAN?"—Page 189.



that she was well able to take care of herself and defend her rights, he dropped from the conversation.

"This mistake is one the printer has made," she said after a further study of the ominous red marks. "I am quite sure that I wrote 'ingestion' and not 'indigestion.' I was not sure of the word and looked in the dictionary. I am quite sure—as sure as I can be that I wrote it correctly." She turned toward Mr. MacMurray. He nodded in affirmation. "Yes, Miss Alden, you did use the word correctly. That is a mistake of the typesetter."

"Do you have no proof-reading?" asked the doctor.

"Most assuredly; but it must necessarily be done very hastily. We cannot give it the time that you give to the revision of a book. I regret the error, and take the responsibility of it. Miss Alden was guiltless there."

"And this?" said Hester. "I can see nothing at all wrong with this. 'Dark damp places, illy ventilated, are a malignant source of tuberculosis.' You have 'malignant' marked with red ink. What is wrong with it?"

"Wrong? It is all irony. 'Malignant' means 'cancerous.' "

"The dictionary says it means 'evil producing,'" said Hester gently.

"In medicine it means 'cancerous.' " Dr. Bridgeman delivered this ultimation with a very pompous air. "The New York doctors would jeer at me for such an expression."

"Perhaps the dictionary would take precedence even of the New York doctors when it comes to the definition of a word," said Hester.

This was quite too much for Mr. MacMurray. He laughed aloud. He considered Hester's little touch of sarcasm most effective. The girl, however, turned toward him with a look of surprise. She could not understand why he laughed. She did not think herself witty, and had not intended being sarcastic. She had made a statement of something as it appeared to her. She saw no reason for Mr. MacMurray's giving way to laughter.

The editor-in-chief, feeling that Hester had sustained her position long enough, took the matter in his own hands. He was decided. He considered matters well before he at-

tempted expression. He could make a show of temper, but he never lost temper. He controlled his voice as well as his facial expression. He arose from his chair and stood erect as though his words were final and closed the conversation.

"As I said before, Dr. Bridgeman, we write for the general public and not for the medical fraternity. It would be out of place for a daily paper to keep to the technicalities of any trade or profession. We have quoted you correctly as far as ideas are concerned. We acknowledged one typographical error and regret it. We shall rectify that, however. As to the use of the adjectives, Miss Alden was justified in taking the dictionary as her standard. You have no criticism then at all. As to the New York medical profession's being set agog by this report and your reputation ruined—that's the veriest kind of nonsense. I doubt if our paper ever reaches that city. Surely, a man with the reputation in medical circles which you claim to have would not lose it by a misstatement if they were so—in the columns of a daily in a city of this size. It's all

a case of bluff. Hereafter, if you wish a report given, send us in a typewritten account. We cannot give you any free advertising otherwise. I'm a busy man, Dr. Bridgeman, so if you will excuse me—”

He did not finish the sentence. He was already bent over the papers on his desk. There was but one thing for Doctor Bridgeman to do, and he did that quickly. He hurried from the office, rushed through the reporters' room and down the stairs.

Hester went back to her desk. She sat down, but could not work. Her eyes were filled with tears so that she could see nothing before her. If Mr. Bateman had not been in the room, she would have put down her head and cried aloud.

She kept back the tears. She had too much pride to carry her hurts so that every one might see and pity her. She did not wish pity. She did not wish people to think that she was a weakling who was not only unable to do any work, but who cried when matters did not move smoothly.

Mr. Blinn had gone out. She was glad that he had. He had such a fun-making way with

him. She felt as though she could not possibly bear teasing or any reference to the mistakes she had made. There had been a personal hurt in the experience of the morning, but there had been more than that. She had had such faith in the perfection of those who do great things; and that faith had crumbled into dust. She could not understand how a man with a dozen diplomas and degrees, who had performed great operations and who spent hours in the sick room, could act like an undisciplined spoiled boy. She was disappointed in him and hurt that her faith in great men had been so rudely shaken.

Mr. Bateman had not raised his head when she came in. He was rattling the keys of the typewriter with lightning speed and humming to himself while he did so. He saw Hester but decided that the kindest course would be to act as though he saw her not. But when after the minutes passed and she sat still without making an attempt to get to work, he decided he'd laugh the matter off. He wheeled about in the chair, took a good look at her and began, "I was just thinking this morning that you were

escaping mighty easy. You've been here all summer and have had nothing but bouquets thrown at you. Why if any one had rubbed me down as smoothly as Mrs. Hill did you, I'd struck for an increase of salary at once. You didn't seem to think much about it. I think you didn't realize how seldom they come to a reporter."

"I think the fuss that Doctor Bridgeman made about his article made up for all the bouquets I have received," said Hester, trying to keep the tears from her voice.

"Surely, you're not caring about that. I wouldn't give that—" he snapped his fingers, "for all his criticism. The trouble with him is that he has a bad case of overdeveloped egotism. He went through the same grandstand performance last summer. I was the guilty one then. I just laughed at him. I didn't even take the trouble to go in and explain. It didn't matter to me whether he thought I was an imbecile or a genius as long as I knew that I had the goods."

"I was sorry that I was the cause of trouble to Mr. MacMurray," said Hester woefully.

"Doctor Bridgeman said dreadful things to him, that he was a fit subject for an asylum, and other things quite as bitter. It was all my fault that Mr. MacMurray had to bear it."

Bateman leaned back and laughed aloud. His effort was a little forced, but it was in a good cause. Hester did not observe that the laugh lacked spontaneity.

"Don't concern yourself about Mac. He enjoys a scrap. If he didn't get one once in so often he'd feel that he had a grievance. A scrap, you know, is to a man like a grindstone to a knife; it sharpens him up and keeps him from getting dull. Besides, that is what Mac gets a big salary for. We poor fellows can peg away in sun and storm and just get enough to pay our board; while Mac lives in luxury and sits in a nice cool office and does nothing except order us around. Don't worry about Mac. He's drawing a big salary just to head off the fellows who have a kick coming."

There was something contagious in Mr. Bateman's point of view. His matter-of-fact manner was more effective than his words. Hester blinked her eyes quickly several times, and

was enabled to force a smile to her lips. Mr. Bateman observed and was greatly encouraged. He continued with an air of a philosopher. "Three weeks from now you'll have forgotten that this happened. A year from now you'll have forgotten even Doctor Bridgeman's name. I wouldn't waste tears over anything that will not be remembered longer than that. I save my tears for something which is really worth while."

"I am not crying. I had no intention of crying," said Hester with some assumption of dignity.

"I did not say you were. You, Miss Alden, have the fault of youth. Every one goes through that stage. I did myself. You have the youthful idea that every remark made in your presence has some direct reference to yourself. Had you been observing, you would have noticed that in my remarks, I used the pronoun 'I.' I said I would not waste my tears. I didn't say anything at all about what you might do."

For an instant Hester's head went up and her chin was tilted at the angle which marked

the danger zone. Just for an instant it was so. Then she laughed. One could not be angry with Mr. Bateman. He had such a droll, serious, old-man air in spite of the fact that he was very young. Hester looked at him and laughed.

"One would think you had the experience of seventy years to your credit to hear you talk," she said. "You're quite a philosopher."

"I don't pretend to be. In this case, I've proved myself a skilled physician of the homoeopathic school."

Hester looked up at him with a look of inquiry.

"Don't you know what their motto is? I suppose that is the right word for it. I'm not up on synonyms. Mac is always telling me that I make one word do the work of ten. Don't you know what they always have on their diplomas? It's their slogan. That's a better word than motto any day."

Hester shook her head. "No, I don't know. I don't think I ever made a study of their diplomas, although I've seen one hanging in Doctor Heim's office."

"It's in Latin." He paused, rubbed his forehead as though that would put the gray cells to work. "I can't remember the Latin words. It's 'similia' something or other. I know the meaning, though. It is 'like cures like.' It works all right in medicines as well as other things. It cured your case of blues right now."

"Mine! I don't understand," said Hester.

"Think it over, Miss Alden. Your wrath against Doctor Bridgeman and your anger at me for criticizing your tears were like the Kilkenny Cats. They swallowed each other, you know."

Mr. Bateman laughed heartily. There was nothing forced about it now. Hester looked quite sober for an instant and then laughed with him.

"I suppose I was very silly," she said. "I shall not think of it again. I shall begin my work and forget that Doctor Bridgeman and tuberculosis exist."

Mr. Bateman was already back at his machine working away at a great speed. Hester turned to her papers. Pinned to the top

was a page in Mr. Blinn's writing. It was named "Consolation" and was inscribed "with sympathy" to Miss Alden. Hester laughed merrily when she read.

"It is always thus from childhood's hour,  
I write the brightest 'squibs' in town,  
But ere my head expands in girth  
Some gay galoot must call me down.

"I wrote a brilliant 'art' on 'med,'  
Then sat and dreamed of great renown,  
But ere gay dreams have fancy fed  
I'm proved the dullest dolt in town.

"But Consolation offers balm  
To all us weary sons of mothers;  
It helps us wonderfully to know  
In times like these, there have been others."

## CHAPTER X

THE unsettled condition of her affairs made it impossible for Debby Alden to decide whether Hester should return to the Seminary at the opening of the fall term. Should the claimants for Ezra's share prove their right, Miss Debby would not only be compelled to divide all she had, but also to make restitution for the tract of lumber land which she had sold the previous year.

The woman who declared herself "Ezra's widow" had been repulsive to Debby Alden. Neither envy nor selfishness had prompted the feeling. There was a natural antagonism. They were by nature opposed. Towards the girl, Deborah, however, Miss Alden had a wholly different feeling. The girl appealed to her. Had Debby had her way, she would have known this girl better. She would have brought her into her home and talked with her. The girl seemed to have a similar attraction

for Debby. She looked longingly at the elder woman when they met in the street or stores. Her eyes followed where Debby Alden moved. She looked like a girl who was hungry for love and confidence. Yet her mother was kind to her and deferred to her wishes whenever they were not in accordance with her own. The girl was not happy. That was evident. Debby knew how she would feel if the time should ever come when she would see in Hester's eyes that unsatisfied, unhappy look that was evident in the eyes of the girl who called herself Deborah Alden. Debby's heart softened toward her. Several times when they met by chance Debby would have spoken with her, but the mother hurried her away, giving opportunity only for a word of recognition.

Mr. Hintner had gone west and had not written. Debby felt that this meant no news, or no good news at least. When he returned, he had little to tell. Silver City had changed from a mining to a manufacturing town. The class of people who had been there when Ezra Alden had drifted in had gone their way. Many had died. Mr. Hintner had visited the

weed-grown cemetery on the hillside in search of names in the hope of tracing some of the families. He had found Ezra's grave, which was marked with a small slab of granite.

William Stokes, the Justice of the Peace, who officiated at Alice Harpster's marriage, had moved away to live with a married daughter. No one remembered where she had gone or the name of her husband. That is, Mr. Hintner could find no one who knew, though it was not to be doubted that there were some, for a young woman does not, in a few years, drop entirely from the memory of the people of her town. Mr. Hintner had visited every "old timer" that he could find trace of. The few who remained had reached the age where memory was uncertain. They could be positive of nothing. Alice Harpster had married, one old man declared, but he couldn't remember the name of the man. He remembered Alice though—"a great big girl with a long braid of red hair."

Then an old crone who had come into Silver City as a bride mumbled away reminiscently.

"Alice Harpster—the jade. Worried her mother to death with her wild ways. Never

would work, always riding bareback, or climbing mountains, and when not doing that, making eyes at the miners. Never so much as cooked a meal and her mother slaving herself to death."

"The mother! What kind of a woman was she?" Mr. Hintner had asked.

At this, the face of the old crone lighted up. "Too good for earth; worked and slaved to bring up her pack of children. She'd better let them all starve for all the good they did her. Always a kind word for every one. Never so poor that she hadn't a crust for them that was poorer. Soft and gentle spoken. Not a young man in all the camp but went to her with his troubles. Just a saint on earth she was. It was a harder earth, too, for her than for most folks."

"Did she take care of Ezra Alden when he was ill?" had been Mr. Hintner's next question.

The old lady shook her head. "How should I know? I didn't live near. We had a new shack close by where the trestle is now; then it was all woods as shady and nice as you please.

The Harpsters had a boarding-place down near where the station is now. You see, I didn't see much of what went on in the house. Mrs. Harpster'd have as high as fifty boarders that she'd cook for. They slept in tents mostly, put up anywhere it was handy."

"But Alice married. Do you remember whom she married?"

The old woman shook her head. "I never took no stock in her with her red mane tossing over her shoulders like she was a wild one. She married some one. I was glad to hear it for her mother's sake; but I don't know as I ever heard the man's name. Alice went away the day she was married. She and her husband was back here when her mother died. But I wasn't here. I was off to Bighorn visiting my son Rufus, who's married and got a job up there."

Mr. Hintner inquired the date. The woman was not sure. She thought, however, that it was about eight years before. She was uncertain. Rufus, however, would remember. It was the summer that his little girl had died.

Mr. Hintner had taken the address of Rufus

who was living in the northwest. If it was possible to fix the date of the old lady's visit and Alice Harpster's return with her husband and daughter, he might accomplish something. He had visited the cemetery a second time to copy the date of the death of Mrs. Harpster. It was nine years previous to Alice Harpster's appearance as an heir to the Ezra Alden estate. Ezra, however, had been dead ten years. There was a discrepancy somewhere.

"I am confident that this woman is an impostor," said Mr. Hintner to Miss Alden. "But we must prove it. If I read the girl aright, her daughter is an unwilling partner in this. The girl looks harassed to death. She's unhappy in her position. I do not doubt that if I could have a talk with her I could persuade her to tell me the whole story. She's naturally upright and honest. Perhaps she has inherited the moral status and mind of her Grandmother Harpster. Every one in Silver City who remembers her, spoke of her with love and respect. I believe this girl is like her. I would talk with her alone, but her mother keeps close guard. The girl never walks alone. I've gone

up to the hotel several times and the mother never leaves the parlor or veranda if her daughter is there. The girl is ready to rebel and the mother fears it. She'll be able to keep her silent as long as there is no outside influence brought to bear."

"Do you think so! Poor girl!" said Debby Alden, while her eyes filled with tears. "Her lot must be very hard. I've thought all along that she did not look happy. I wish there was something I could do for her. I know how I should feel if Hester was looking so miserable."

Mr. Hintner restrained a smile. He might expect such sentiment from Debby Alden. Practical, economical, and far-seeing as she was, she was a sentimentalist in heart and was moved to pity by the sight of mental or physical suffering. She possessed a wonderful faculty which is denied many a brilliant man or woman. She could put herself in the other person's place and understand how that one felt. She could never be selfish, for she suffered when others suffered. Now, she forgot herself and what the loss of her estate would mean to her. She thought only of the unhappy young girl whom

filial obedience compelled to a course opposed to her sense of right. This younger Deborah Alden had material things which are supposed to count for happiness. She was living at the best hotel in town; she dressed handsomely and drove with her mother about the country. But these things did not reconcile her conscience to her mother's course of conduct and her own.

Debby Alden understood and sympathized with such mental suffering. She knew now why she had been drawn toward the girl.

"Poor child!" she said again. "I wish I could do something for her. Is there anything I could do, Mr. Hintner?"

The attorney smiled. "There are many things which you might do, but not one, I am sure, which her mother will permit you to do."

"Perhaps, some day, I may," said Miss Alden, smiling. "Matters may turn out better than you and I expect."

"I hope so—" Then he corrected himself. "They will turn the right way. I'll see to that. I am convinced that this woman is an impostor. I must have proof, however. The law will allow us a year to settle the estate after the

claim is made. Unless we have ample proof beforehand, we'll take every minute allowed us. Sometimes the unexpected holds off until the eleventh hour."

"Do you think Conrad and Westerleigh would take part in such work?" asked Debby Alden. "I do not like to think that they would willingly be partners to fraud."

"I believe they are honest enough in this. The woman comes to them with a statement of her case and what appears to be sufficient proof to substantiate her claim. To them, the proceedings may be aboveboard. Their sympathies may be with you, Miss Alden, for they have known you all your life and are part of the town; but sympathy should not count in legal matters. If they are convinced that this person was your brother's wife, it was right for them to take the case."

"I understand," said Debby. "Their attitude is much like my own. If this is Ezra's widow, I would give her what was his without question, but I should not like to give it to a stranger who has no claim on it. I'm quite sure I should prefer keeping it."

"To return to my western experience," said Mr. Hintner. "I found that William Stokes, the Justice of the Peace, had gone with his daughter. After a week's thorough canvass of the town, I could find no one who remembered her name or could locate her. A notice in the town and county papers, however, brought better results. The young woman herself had seen my notice asking for information concerning her name and address. She wrote me at once." The attorney paused a moment. "I'm a little doubtful as to the motive which prompted her to this," he said with a smile. "It was not all generous impulse brought about by a desire to help some one. I think it was more the natural curiosity of womankind."

"Say, rather, of *some* women," said Debby Alden. "You cannot mass us under one head and say that we have the same virtues or vices. We are quite different, I assure you."

"I believe that. I shall not impugn her motive. Whatever it was, she wrote me. She had married a man named Randalls and was living at Lanier. I lost no time in going there. Lanier is about fifty miles from Silver City."

Debby Alden was leaning forward with a show of earnestness in her manner. Her eyes were glowing and a crimson spot burned in each cheek. Since Hester had admired her in white frocks, Debby had fallen into the habit of wearing them on all suitable occasions. She looked dainty and high-bred in her immaculate white linen and Milan hat with bows of white ribbon. She had gathered a great bunch of pink and lavender sweet peas to carry to a friend. These lay loosely in her lap against the snowy whiteness of the linen. It was the finishing touch to a beautiful picture, but Debby Alden never suspected it.

Her eagerness verged almost on impatience as she leaned forward. Mr. Hintner talked too slowly and deliberately when matters were at a crisis. The attorney observed her impatience, but he did not hurry his speech. He took his own time to speak and consider well before he expressed himself.

"Her father," she told me, "had been living with her since her marriage. He had been buried, however, some time last spring. She knew little of his records. When he had

packed preparatory to his leaving Silver City he had destroyed several boxes of letters and papers of different kinds. He had brought a few with him. She was under the impression, however, that these related only to her own family."

"Did you look them over? Would she permit you to do that?" asked Debby Alden.

"She was willing enough but it could not be, just at this time. The boxes were packed away in an attic. She said there was barely room for a child to stand upright, the roof was so low. The place was unfinished. Her husband had some of his papers and little keepsakes packed away there. She could not hunt up the papers herself, and she would not permit a stranger to go rummaging about, since the articles packed away were not her own. I was willing to wait an hour or a day, but even that did not do. Her husband is a traveling salesman for one of the mining companies. He was out on the road then. She was never sure of his arrival. She did not believe, however, that he would return in less than a week or ten days. He had gone east and was working his way

west, stopping in most of the larger manufacturing towns."

"And nothing could be done?" asked Debby. "It seems too bad to go so far and almost have the information and then let it slip from your hands."

"Scarcely that. She gave me her word of honor that she would look over the papers when her husband returned and if there was a word relating to Ezra Alden or the Harpster family, she would forward it to me at once. I think I can depend upon her. I am not easily deceived in people. She had the appearance of an honest, common-sense woman who would not make a promise she could not fulfill.

"Of her own accord, she gave me some information. She was a little girl while in Silver City, perhaps fifteen years younger than Alice Harpster. She remembered some things which had occurred there, although she says her family moved away before she was ten years old. She did remember Alice Harpster's being married. The younger girls were supposed to be attending school which had opened in a shack which miners had discarded, and which was

being taught by a young man from an eastern college who had come west to prospect and had found it anything but paying business. The report was carried to school at noon that Alice Harpster was going to be married at noon up at Squire Stokes's.

"Weddings had been few in Silver City. This Ruth Stokes says that she and several other girls who came under the head of her nearest and dearest friends played truant and hurried back to Squire Stokes's office which was in the front room of his house. There was no one in, as it was barely past dinner-time. The girls climbed up a ladder into a loft which opened by a trap door. Here they lay face downward peering through the small square opening. They were forced to wait some time, for the squire was tardy in getting around. But the girls had the satisfaction of seeing a real wedding with Alice Harpster as the bride. The newly married pair went away on the afternoon stage. The girls intended going down to the tavern to see them off, but fate and the squire decided otherwise. He stayed below with several men

and talked politics and smoked for an hour after the ceremony had been performed. Ruth was afraid of her father's displeasure. She would not have ventured from her hiding-place while he was about. So the girls lay there in the dust, flat on their faces, while the bridal pair went off in a gayly decorated stage."

"Then she would know the name of the groom if she saw Alice Harpster married," said Debby Alden. The attorney shook his head. "You must remember that she was little more than a child. The wedding appealed to her because it was something she had heard of and never seen. She knew Alice Harpster and of course that name remained with her. She told me that she could not remember the name of the man; that she was not sure that she had heard it even during the ceremony."

Mr. Hintner showed no disappointment in the results of his trip. His faith in the ultimate results of the settlement was so evident that Debby Alden wondered if he had not kept something worth while from her. Perhaps there was something yet in such an unsettled state that he could not even hint at it.

Debby, however, was disappointed. Mr. Hintner had spoken of a year's passing before a possible settlement might be made.

"I wish the matter could be adjusted soon," she said. "Whatever the results, I would prefer certainty to uncertainty. I cannot decide about Hester's return to school."

"Why not? Were you dissatisfied with the Seminary work?"

"Far from it. I wish she could return and graduate. Seminary trustees, being but human, demand money for services rendered. If I must settle with Ezra's heirs I shall have very little. You understand that as well as I do. Under the circumstances, I cannot spend the money for her education."

"Will you take my advice?" Mr. Hintner asked suddenly. "Take it without questioning or quibbling in the least?"

"I think I can readily promise that," said Miss Alden. "You know my financial affairs. You are interested in Hester's welfare as well as I, as an attorney and a friend. Yes, Mr. Hintner, I shall take your advice. I know that what you advise will be wise and disinterested."

"Then get your niece ready for school and send her off the very day it opens." Debby would have spoken but he raised a silencing hand. "Remember you promised to obey without question. You have enough ready money in the bank to pay your own and her expenses until the first of the year."

"Most assuredly," said Debby. "The Aldens never count so close that they cannot see a few months ahead. Yes, it has always been my rule to keep a little ready money where I could put my hands on it in case of an emergency. One never knows what is going to turn up."

"If every one could live up to that theory, there would be less trouble. Hester must go to school. I'll promise you this. If this woman proves her claim and you are forced to the wall financially, I'll be responsible for Hester's Seminary bills. Now please do not say a word, Miss Alden." He raised his hand as though to stop her words. "I do not expect to spend one cent. I make this promise to prove to you that I have faith in the ultimate success of our efforts. But if things should go astray,

I do not wish you burdened with bills brought about by taking my advice."

Debby Alden gathered together her bouquet of sweet peas and arose to leave.

"Whichever way the matter ends, I shall not come to want. The Aldens were never people to live at a pinch. I'll try not to be the first of the family. Grandmother Palmer used to say, 'There are more ways out of the woods than one.' If I cannot see my path clear in one direction, I can turn to another. I promise you that Hester shall be sent to school."

When she had gone, Mr. Hintner mentally reviewed every detail of the case. He had no doubt that the woman was an impostor and that she was not working alone. There was some one in the background to advise and assist her. Who that person was, or whether it were one or several, Mr. Hintner could not decide. Another phase of the case presented itself. Taking it for granted that the woman was an impostor, why did she not put her efforts to use to gain more than what the paltry half of the Alden estate would be? Her share, acting upon the supposition that she would be able

to secure it, would not be sufficient for a living for herself and daughter.

If she really was Ezra's widow, why did she not make herself known ten years before? If she were not, why did she waste her time and ingenuity on such a little scheme?

These questions presented themselves to Mr. Hintner's mind. He believed that the solution of one would mean the solution of the other. After turning the matter over in his mind, he decided that something new in connection with the Alden estate had come up within the last year, something which would make it worth while. Coupled with the vague reports which had been current for months and what Hester had told him of seeing the man, Bates, in the ravine in company with two strangers, the conversation in regard to the report and the papers scattered about, led to the same conclusion. The men had come up over the hill, so Hester had told him. This was the way most difficult to travel. It was stony and overgrown with underbrush and wild berry vines. James Bates had led them past the open footpath. It was evident that he did not wish to be seen by the

Bowerman or the Alden family. His action was not above suspicion. He who is doing no evil fears not to be seen.

Mr. Hintner turned and touched a bell. When his boy responded, he requested him to bring a certain book on geology. It was a practical volume giving the composition of different strata. Under clays of various kinds he found a list of the essentials of fire-clay. Among them were soda, lime, sulphur, as Hester had said.

It was fire-clay, then, which was the attraction to James Bates. If the ravine and hills beyond were rich in it, the Alden estate would be something worth while. James Bates knew that clay was there. That was evident. He was not a manufacturer himself or he would have gone directly to Debby Alden and transacted business with her. From what Hester had told him, Mr. Hintner decided that Bates had appeared in the capacity of a seller rather than a purchaser.

Mr. Hintner's elbows found their way to the polished surface of his desk. His head went down upon his upturned palms. For a long

while he sat so, and gradually the whole scheme revealed itself to him. This Bates and the woman who called herself Mrs. Alden were working together. She was to prove her claim to a half of the Alden estate. Perhaps she would later assume a self-sacrificing mood, and declare that she would not rob Debby of her home. She would be generous and take as her share the ravine and fields beyond the hill. While she was doing this, Bates, pretending to be the Alden agent, would have purchasers ready. The instant the transfer of land is made into Alice Harpster's name, the sale with the fire-clay people is consummated. That part of the scheme was clear. Mr. Hintner could not understand the reason for the conversation on the train which the man, Bates, and his jolly little companion had contrived that Hester should hear. That there was a purpose in it, Mr. Hintner did not doubt. He gave little thought to that phase of the case. He was satisfied with his afternoon's work in clearing away some of the tangles. It is one thing, however, to convince one's self and quite another to convince others. He must set about to find proof. The

first step would be to discover where Jim Bates and Alice Harpster had come from previous to their appearance at the Bend. He would set some one to trace their movements backward instead of looking about for a starting-point to work forward from.

Miss Herard, the private stenographer, was with his partner. He rang for her and dictated a letter and instructed her to make a number of first copies of it, and to use paper with business head.

The letter was one which might be sent to any manufacturer of fire-clay. It stated that the writer as attorney for the Alden estate would like the matter of the option on the Alden clay settled; that if any doubt was in their mind as to the value, they could send one or more of their men to examine and take a quantity for analysis. The letter was written in such a style that one would believe that this was but a continuation of a correspondence and not the first.

Mr. Hintner knew that from any trade publication he would be able to secure the name and address of every manufacturer of fire-brick

in the country. He would send a copy of the letter to each firm. One of them would be that with which James Bates had negotiations. He knew that they would communicate with him at once, if for nothing more than to learn why he had thrust himself into this matter. He believed that they would go deeper. Business men do not spend hundreds of thousands of dollars without understanding every move made in relation to that spending.

## CHAPTER XI

SATURDAY afternoons Hester's office work was lessened and she came home early. She always carried with her six dollars. Her feet were very light at such times and she covered the distance between the office and home in about half the time she generally required. Six dollars! It was that when she left for home, but her talisman touch made it much more before she reached her own door. Sometimes it had been a five-dollar bill and a one. Other times it had been all one-dollar bills. She preferred the ones. It seemed to be much more, and it took her longer to count it slowly into her Aunt Debby's hands.

For Saturday evening lunch Debby Alden had always some extra dainty that Hester liked. It was the Saturday evening mail, too, which generally brought a letter from Helen Loraine. So, considering all matters, Saturday afternoon

was a most satisfactory ending for a busy week.

This particular afternoon she returned to find a letter from Helen Loraine awaiting her. She sat down under the apple-tree to read it while Debby put the finishing touches to the evening meal.

Helen had spent the summer with Mrs. Vail. "Dear Auntie is most miserable, both mentally and physically," she wrote. "Her trips were wholly unsatisfactory, with no results but a poor, tired-out, disappointed woman to come home with just a little less hope than ever before."

Hester read that part of the letter several times. She did not grasp the full meaning. During the months she had roomed with Helen, such suggestions had been frequent. Sad! Disappointed! Hopeless! Why? Hester had no idea. She looked upon Mrs. Vail as one of the fortunate women of the world.

"Dr. James Baker has been here part of the summer. I showed him your picture. He noticed the resemblance to me, though I told him at once that you were 'heaps' better-looking.

He seemed very much interested in you; asked all sorts of questions. I, like a veritable little chatterbox, told him everything I knew about you and your Aunt Debby. I am growing quite proud of my descriptive power in narrative. He listened for an hour while I described your beautiful Miss Debby, with her sweet, gracious manner.

“I told him that I was coming to visit you. I am going to do that very thing, and within a week or two. Unless you send me word not to come, you may expect me next Thursday. Dr. Baker says he will come down to meet you and your aunt while I am there. I hope that you and Miss Debby will be more than gracious to him. He has no home—only rooms, which are no home at all. You remember that there was a romantic story about his having a sweetheart long ago.”

Helen was not easily tired in letter writing. She continued with news of all the old school friends. Hester cared nothing about these later personals. Like a flash, understanding came to her. The picture of the pink-cheeked boy, whom Aunt Debby called “Jim Baker.”

"No wonder he was interested in all Helen told him concerning the Aldens." Hester laughed softly. Dear Aunt Debby! How lovely it would be! Hester sat for some time turning over plans in her own mind. At length she went in to lunch.

"My letter was from Helen Loraine," she said. "She will be here next Thursday, Aunt Debby, unless we send her word that it will not be convenient to have her."

"It will be. We shall give her a royal welcome. She will do us good. You and I have allowed ourselves to become nervous over this affair of Ezra's. We need diversion."

"I shall write her at once." Hester did not mention Dr. Baker's name, nor did she offer to let Debby read the letter as had always been her custom. She could not repress the smiles and dimples. It was very evident that she was keeping back something.

"What is it, Hester? You are smiling to yourself as though you had a state secret."

"I am pleased with Helen's letter. She has written so many pleasant things."

"I am glad you are free this afternoon, Hes-

ter.’’ Miss Debby rose from the table. ‘‘I have been sewing for you, and I must have you try on before I go further.’’

‘‘What is it, Aunt Debby?’’ Hester came close and looked down on a row of beautifully made button holes.

‘‘A shirt-waist for you. It is almost done except putting in the sleeves. I should like to fit it under the arms a little and trim out the arm-holes. I’ve always had a little trouble with the fit there.’’

‘‘I did not know you intended making me one,’’ cried Hester, delighted. Taking up the waist, she looked it over. ‘‘It’s a dream—simply a dream,’’ she said. ‘‘Where did you get that insertion, Aunt Debby? If there is one thing I simply adore, it is a shirt-waist tucked with tiny pin-tucks and insertion between.’’ She was quite excited over her new possession. ‘‘When did you start it? I didn’t know you intended making it.’’

‘‘I did the tucking yesterday. The rest I did after dinner to-day. I have done so little sewing all summer that your waists are getting very shabby. They will stand very few trips

to the tub. You'll need at least a half-dozen. Fortunately, I can easily make them. I can easily make a plain tailored one in an afternoon. I thought you would get along nicely with two fine ones and four heavier, plainer ones."

"Six? I think I shall. The office is a dirty place to work in, Aunt Debby. Don't you think dark flannel waists would be more suitable? It will take such a quantity of laundry work."

"I had no thought of the office, Hester. The fifteenth of next month school will open. I have written to Doctor Weldon that you will be there. I have asked her to reserve your old room if possible, and to secure for you a room-mate as nearly like Helen Loraine as possible." Debby laughed softly. Hester's love for Helen was unbounded. "Does that please you, or would you rather have one not like Helen?"

"Oh—" Hester drew the word out slowly. It was impossible to trust herself to speech. She stood quite still for an instant, her eyes all the while growing bigger and bigger. Then suddenly, she recovered herself and, pouncing upon Debby Alden, she threw her arms about her and hugged her hard. All the while, she

kept saying, "Really! Really! Is it true? Am I to go back?"

"I would like to take a breath, Hester, if you don't object," said Debby after a few minutes had passed and Hester's clasp had not relaxed. Debby gently drew herself away from the bear-like embrace. "Hester, do be calm. Sit down here and let's talk over the matter. You are such an emotional creature when you once let go of your feelings. I wish you would learn more self-control. I do not like—"

"Yes, you do, Aunt Debby, but you think it's silly to acknowledge it. You like me to be fussy over you, and all the while you try to act as though you were merely putting up with it. I know you like it. I intend from this very day to be just as fussy as I like, and that will mean most of the time."

"Hester," said Debby Alden in a tone of reproach. She always intended disciplining Hester. Debby believed in rigid discipline for young persons. She believed in it as a theory; but, somehow better results were always reached by discussing a subject with Hester rather than commanding her to follow a course

blindly. Debby satisfied her conscience by being, at rare intervals, very severe with Hester. The result had always been the same. Hester read her adopted aunt very well. When Debby assumed her rigid, critical air, Hester always laughed, gave her a good hug, and the discipline ended there. She did this now. Debby bore it with stolid good grace.

"Now, Hester, if you have finished with your nonsense, we'll discuss your going to school. Your clothes are not in the order I wish them."

"Can I really go, Aunt Debby? What about the money?"

"That has been arranged for. We must not put off your education. Now are the years for that."

Hester had forgotten about the *Daily Record* and the possible glory which might come to her as a journalist. She was clutching the six one-dollar bills in her hand. In her excitement she had caught them together and they lay in her hand in a tightly rolled ball. She had forgotten about them. She controlled herself sufficiently to sit beside Debby and discuss the new articles necessary for her wardrobe. At

intervals, however, she broke forth in a low laugh.

"Just to think I'm going back when I'd given that up. It's too good to be true. Please pinch me, Aunt Debby. I know I have fallen asleep and am only dreaming. Please pinch me—here on the arm." She held forth a very plump arm.

"Instead, I shall box your ears," she said. "Sometimes I think I have not fulfilled my duty by you. I should have spanked you more frequently when you were little and boxed your ears now when you are a big girl."

"I may have needed it," cried Hester gayly. "But you couldn't do it, Aunt Debby, even if I had needed it badly. The trouble is, Auntie, you never would have seen that I needed it, however naughty I might have been."

"I'm generally considered very discerning, Hester," said Miss Alden. "You do not flatter me by such a statement."

Hester laughed again. She was fairly bubbling over with joy. "You and I are just alike in one way, Aunt Debby. It's really more as though I were your daughter than your niece.

You think that everything I do is right, and I often sit and wonder if you really are perfect or if I just think so. I often look at other women and think how much more beautiful you—”

Debby Alden reached forward and laid her finger tips on Hester's lips. It was flattery, of course. The boldest sort of flattery, yet practical Debby Alden who was famed for her rare common sense liked it. It warmed all the region of her heart and took away for the time that feeling of loneliness, which in spite of Hester's presence was always with her. Her cheeks flushed into a soft delicate color and her eyes grew bright. Hester's rare demonstrations of affection and her expressions of love always sent Debby Alden's mind back twenty years. The drives to spelling school were as though it were but yesterday that she had gone with Jim Baker. She could see his round boyish face with its pink cheeks and laughing eyes. Only for an instant did she permit herself to be reminiscent. In her own mind she called herself very foolish and recalled the fact that she had had a fortieth birthday. Try as she would,

she could not feel old. To-day with the summer air about her, the laden branches of the apple-tree bending over her, she could not be old. In spirit and heart she was just Hester's age. Just an instant of dreaming, and then she brought herself back to the present.

"You can wear your coat-suit again this winter. It needs a good pressing. It was a very well-made suit in the beginning. I am afraid, however, that you've outgrown your long coat. You'll need that in skating."

"Aunt Debby, I'd rather have a sweater. A long coat is too heavy to skate in, and it flops about your heels too much. I'm always very warm when I skate. A sweater is quite wrap enough."

They discussed the subject from all points of view. The first excitement had subsided. Hester became conscious that she was clasping a tight wad of bills in her hand.

"Oh, my precious money. I forgot about it," she exclaimed. She smoothed the bills out nicely and handed them to Miss Alden. This brought to Hester's mind something she had forgotten. "About my work, Aunt Debby!"

What shall I do about that? I shall be really sorry to give it up. There is something pleasant, although it is hard at times and I come home tired. The men in the office are kind to me. I like Mr. MacMurray now that I am acquainted with him, although at first I was a little bit afraid of him. He looks cross, but when you come to look closely you'll find that it is only his eyebrows which are cross. His eyes are kind and twinkle when anything funny happens. What shall I do about the office work, Aunt Debby?"

"The only thing that can be done. You must stay with them next week. It would not be just to them to leave without giving them time to arrange their work. Monday morning you may speak to Mr. MacMurray and tell him the reason for your leaving and that after two weeks you cannot return to the office."

"Aunt Debby," Hester leaned eagerly forward and laid the tips of her fingers against Debby Alden's arm. There was genuine concern in her voice and anxiety in her expression. "Aunt Debby, what about my salary? How will you get along without it? It isn't very

much, I know. It will be more soon. Mr. Bateman says they always raise the salary to ten dollars a week after one has worked three months and made good. Those were his words, 'made good.' How will you get along without my salary, Aunt Debby? I will not stop work and go away if you must deny yourself and perhaps work and get tired."

"I've been tired many times, Hester, and recovered from it. I do not know that being tired is an evil to be avoided. On the contrary, I think it's an excellent thing if it does not happen too often. I shall not be compelled to go out and work for other people. If I should, I think I shall turn lecturer," she laughed softly. "Our Club women have asked me to give a talk at the next meeting on Myths and Folklore for children. It is very silly to ask me, there are so many intelligent, educated women among the members."

"But you can do it. You'll not refuse, Aunt Debby? You can easily do it."

"I shall tell them the ones that I reared you on, Hester. What a great quantity I used to know and tell to you! You never grew tired

of hearing them. Sometimes I was at my wits' ends to satisfy you. I shall tell those. If they like the result of my work, they can follow my method. If they do not, they will leave it alone."

"But, Aunt Debby, about the money? You didn't really answer my questions, you know. Tell me really, truly, how can you get along without my salary?"

"Just as I have been doing, Hester." Miss Alden looked at the bills in her hand with loving tenderness. "Did you think for one moment, Hester Alden, that I would let you go out and earn for me when I'm well and strong? I loved you better for the spirit which prompted you to do what you did and the generous way in which you handed your little store to me that I might spend it as I would without a question. I loved you for the spirit which prompted you to do what you did. It was the right one, but I could not have you work for me. I allowed you to work these eight weeks because I believed it would do you good. You have learned a great deal. Sometimes I think quite as much as you did at the Seminary, although of a different or-

der. You have learned to do exactly as you're told." Debby smiled as she continued, "and that without asking the reason. You've learned a great deal about writing. That lesson in adjectives was worth a great deal to you. I sometimes think you should pay Mr. MacMurray for his lesson instead of having it the other way."

"You don't appreciate me, Aunt Debby. You forget always that I am not a little girl. I'm a wage-earner; a literary woman; a journalist. Any one of the three is quite important. You think of me always as a little girl."

"And I always shall. You will never become old enough or famous enough to be anything more than my little girl. You'll always be my little girl to me." There was something pathetic in the manner in which this was said. In spite of her words Debby Alden realized that Hester was growing up. The little girl would soon be a woman. Debby was too practical to give up to her emotions for any length of time.

"The money that you have given me I have not spent, Hester," Debby continued. "I have put it in the bank to your credit. Mr. Allen

made out a nice little book for you. This will make the fund forty-eight dollars; next week it will be fifty-four. You must learn how to take care of your own money. Father was very broad-minded about his children. He always said that he knew no reason why his daughter should not be taught how to manage her money as well as his sons. Father took great pains to teach me about checks and notes and deposits of various kinds. It has always been a help to me. I shall teach you about it. Having a little money laid away earning a little for one, always gives a comfortable feeling. It's always better to be a little ahead than a little behind and it's far less worrisome to the nerves. I believe in always having a roof for a rainy day.

"Next Saturday I shall go with you to the bank. You can get a certificate of deposit for fifty-four dollars. That will earn for you two dollars a year. It would almost keep you in gloves, Hester. It will be much wiser to let the fifty dollars earn gloves or hose for you than to earn them yourself. A little self-denial now and then makes it possible. Some folks

never see it that way. They never realize that money is to be servant of the people. When rightly used it is that."

Before tea-time, Debby and Hester had settled to their satisfaction the wardrobe that would be needed for the coming year at school and Hester had heard a practical talk in writing checks and signing her name.

Monday morning Hester entered the office earlier than was required of her. She wished to speak to Mr. MacMurray before she went to her assignments. She told him of Miss Alden's decision in regard to school and that her work in the office must end with the week.

"Better for you to be in school," said Mr. MacMurray gruffly. "Miss Alden is quite right in that. I'm sorry to lose you, though. You'll make a journalist in time. You're young yet and there's a lot of things you must learn. Perhaps I expected too much of you all summer. Don't give up your writing. Any one who has the smallest atom of talent in that line should cultivate it. It will take time, but you'll come out all right in the end. It's stick-to-itiveness which counts."

That ended the conversation as far as Hester herself was concerned. Mr. MacMurray gave her some directions as to the week's work and then turned to the pile of work on his desk. Hester knew this to be a sign of dismissal and went back to the outer office.

Mr. Wilson had recuperated during his two months' vacation, which he had spent in a camp in the pine woods where newspaper, copies, or editorial never penetrated. He would return the following week and take up his work. This meant a step down again for the three men who had been advanced to fill his place. Hester being on the last rung of the ladder might have been pushed entirely off. It was fortunate for her that she was able to resign and could look forward to school.

August is a dull month for newspaper people. Many business offices are closed and society is at a standstill. A reporter learns to pad material during August in town or city. The Woman's Club had adjourned for a time. These lessened Hester's assignments. She was kept busy in looking up references for Mr. MacMurray. It had become known that she would give

up her work at the end of the week, but no cause had been assigned. The spirit of helpfulness asserted itself.

Miss Maynard took the opportunity of coming to Hester's desk to offer her help. "If you're resigning because the work is too heavy, I'd reconsider. I did not realize that you were new to the work. It has been such a long time since I came into the office that I had forgotten how arduous a beginner finds it. You will get used to it in time, and it will seem easier. I can help you some. I should have offered to do it before. I was simply thoughtless. Dictate to me in place of writing. It will be much easier."

"Thank you, Miss Maynard. You were helpful to me from the beginning. I have not resigned because the work is too heavy." She would have given the reason, but some one came in to claim Miss Maynard's attention and the conversation ended.

"What's this about your resigning?" asked Mr. Bateman in his blunt, quick way. "What's the matter? Don't you like the people in the office? Haven't we treated you well? I know

I have a short way of speaking, Miss Alden, but I don't mean to be ugly. It's just a disagreeable habit I've fallen into and can't break myself of. I hope I haven't said or done anything to make the office work unpleasant?"

"No, indeed you have not. Every one has been as kind as can be. I do not know how you could have been more considerate. I did not resign because of that. I—"

Mr. Blinn came rushing in. Strange to say, he was neither whistling nor singing. He hurried across the room. "Nice reporter you are, Miss Alden. They tell me that you reported that you had resigned. It's all a mistake. There isn't a word of truth in it. Have you not been taught to verify your reports before they are made public? No, you have not resigned. You will remain in the office of the *Record* until you're editor. After that we'll consent to your leaving if you go where honors wait—to a desk in the city."

"I think it's your poetry, Blinn, that has done the business," said Bateman, looking quite serious. "Your poetry is—"

"My poetry," said Blinn, looking as though

the words were new to him. "I never wrote a line of poetry in my life."

"I know you didn't, but you thought it that. That stuff you called poetry did the business. I warned you before. This is the third reporter you've driven off and yet you'll not learn."

Hester had learned to like Mr. Blinn with his ability to do a great amount of serious work and yet jest and laugh as though he knew no responsibilities. She admired his skill in twisting his sentences. He knew literature and was always changing a quotation to suit the occasion.

"I should think you would sell all your funny rhymes, Mr. Blinn," said Hester. "I'm sure the funny papers would be glad to buy them."

"You don't know the funny papers, Miss Alden, and you don't know Blinn. You're flattering him. To me, his attempts at humor are simply pathetic."

"Pure jealousy," said Blinn calmly. "I have written a great deal, Miss Alden. One time at home I had our cellar and attic packed

with manuscripts. I took them out once to burn them. It was a week's work."

Hester looked at him keenly. She was not quite sure if he were joking or not. His face was serious enough to make one believe that he was in earnest.

"And you never tried to sell them?" she asked. He shook his head and smiled a sad, wan smile as he said slowly, as though relating a tale of woe,

"I burnt the stuff what I had writ,  
Of gay romance and gruesome tale;  
Burst into flames when they were lit,  
They made the summer sun look pale.  
So great the pile, the Orient  
Just touched it on the eastern side,  
And in the west the Occident  
Kept them from blowing far and wide."

Hester assumed as serious an air as he. "There must have been quite a number," she said.

"There were," said Mr. Blinn. "I go forth now to write more." It was well that he reached the decision, for Mr. MacMurray com-

ing into the room glanced at the clock and then at Mr. Blinn.

"I am off this instant," said Mr. Blinn.

"As you usually are," said the chief. "If you catch the ten o'clock, you'll be able to do more than most of us."

"I usually do—" he paused and glanced from the chief to Bateman—"do more," he finished as he closed the door back of him.

Mr. MacMurray laughed until his sides shook. "There's no getting ahead of him. He's always a ready word, and he'll have the last one." He turned to Hester. "Miss Alden, I wish you would look over a file of dailies of three years ago. I think the article I want was in August. I'm not sure. You had better begin with July and examine each one. This is what I want." He handed her a paper on which was written "W. S. Clarke vs. Alliston Suburban Railway."

"Three years ago W. S. Clark brought suit against the company. We had the full particulars in the *Record* at that time. The question has come up again and is on the docket for September Court. Find the account of three

years ago and call me. I'll take from it what I wish."

The files were kept in the vault. Mr. Bateman brought out that of three years ago and placed it on Hester's desk. The papers were musty and covered with dust. Hester fingered them gingerly. She turned the pages slowly, letting her eye run down each column. Any article which in any way suggested the one for which she was searching she read over carefully. It was a task which could not be performed hurriedly. It was tedious. Hester's eyes grew tired, moving from top to bottom of the column. She had gone over almost a hundred papers when a leading article on the first page caught her eye. It was press matter illustrated with two photographs. Hester's eyes fell on the picture. Then she leaned forward and began to read the article word for word. When that was finished, she looked again at the picture. "The hair is worn different. That's all. It's the same person." She was so excited that she cried aloud. The other persons in the office looked at her in surprise, but Hester was indifferent to all about her. Hur-

rying into Mr. MacMurray's office, she exclaimed, "I found something in a paper there which is very important to—to Aunt Debby and me. Mr. Hintner must see it at once. Can I take the paper to him?"

"It is really impossible, Miss Alden, to allow the files to leave the office. That is a law among newspaper people."

"But Mr. Hintner must see it. You do not realize how very important it is. It's—it's—well, I cannot explain to you, but it's something Mr. Hintner has traveled all over the country to find out."

"The paper cannot leave the office." Then seeing the genuine anxiety on Hester's face, Mr. MacMurray added, "Call up Mr. Hintner at his office. Let him know what you have found and ask him to come here and see. He has the privilege of reading or copying it if he thinks it worth while."

Hester was already at the telephone. When she had communication with Mr. Hintner's office, she began talking hurriedly and in broken sentences. "It's Hester Alden talking, Mr. Hintner. I'm at the *Record* office. I found

something among the papers. You want it. Mr. MacMurray says for you to come. Right away, please! It's important. Don't wait until after lunch, please." Then with a glad, "Will you really? Thank you," she hung up the receiver.

## CHAPTER XII

WHEN Hester's telephone call came for him, Mr. Hintner was busy with his morning's mail. His stenographer had sent out twenty letters to the addresses which he had given her. These twenty names embraced the fire-brick people of the country. One of these twenty Mr. Hintner was confident would be the firm with whom Jim Bates was transacting business. The replies had been coming in for several days. Each had said in substance that there must have been a mistake in addressing the enclosed letter to their firm. They had had no communications in regard to the Alden clay-field. If the proposition were worth while, they would be glad to consider it. Seven letters had come to Mr. Hintner. This morning three more lay on his desk. The second one had given him the information for which he had been writing. It was from the firm of Miller and Woodin, the largest fire-brick

manufacturers of the country. They informed the firm of Hintner and Hendig that they were ready to fulfill the verbal agreement made between them and Mrs. Alden's man of business, Mr. Bates. Their attorney would confer with Mr. Hintner at any date that would be convenient for him.

This clinched the matter for Mr. Hintner. He perhaps could not prove that the Alice Harpster was a trickster, but he had sufficient proof to frighten her and Jim Bates into giving up the claim if they were not honest.

This man, Bates, was not staying at the same hotel with Mrs. Alden and her daughter. They pretended to have no knowledge of each other. Mr. Hintner had seen them pass each other on the street without a sign of recognition. It was plainly evident that they wished no one to know that their interests were the same.

The description which Mr. Hintner had received of the man Alice Harpster had married suggested Jim Bates. The suspicion was in Mr. Hintner's mind that Jim Bates was the man who had married Alice Harpster, and hear-

ing by chance of the great wealth of clay which lay on the Alden estate they determined to get it by fraud. No doubt, they meant to dispose of it to Miller and Woodin for cash the instant the woman had the deed in her name, and then leave the locality. It was a cleverly planned scheme, but incidents were forcing themselves to the firm in order that the scheme would miscarry.

“File this letter, but do not answer until I speak of the matter again.”

He talked with Hester then over the telephone. He thought her unduly excited and told her she might call at the office and tell him what she had found of interest, but she had not been satisfied with this and begged him to call at once. He had promised. Her insistence had not pleased him. He was a man who made his own plans and did not permit them to be interfered with because of the whims or importunities of others. His acceding to Hester's request was unusual. He put away his letters and gave the bell-boy orders to call for his machine. It was almost noon. He would call at

the *Record* office, look over the all-important something which Hester had found, and go home to lunch.

"Mail what I have dictated," he said to Miss Herard. "I'll not be back before two o'clock, if any one should ask for me."

His man and machine were waiting for him in the street below. He went down and gave directions to drive to the *Record* office. He was not in the best of humor at the interruption. He kept his feelings to himself, however.

Hester had not been able to return to her work. She could think of nothing but the article with its glaring headlines which had flaunted itself before her eyes. While awaiting Mr. Hintner's appearance, she read the article again. The print was not that of the daily. She discovered that an odd copy of an exchange had been put in by mistake. This was the *Daily Record* of a city on the border of the Great Lakes.

"It's just luck," she exclaimed. "How strange that some one made that mistake three years ago and now it may save Aunt Debby a great deal. It's luck— No, it is more what

Helen Loraine calls providential. Providence is looking after Aunt Debby's interest."

She moved from desk to door, where she stood and looked up and down the street hoping to catch a glimpse of Mr. Hintner's green car. There was really but a delay of a few minutes, but to Hester it seemed like hours. She could not tell whether it were morning or afternoon. She had forgotten entirely that there was such a time as lunch hour.

At last he came. He was calm and serene. He had not the faintest idea that Hester's find was worth the trouble of coming a square for.

"Miss Hester Alden, good morning," he said as he entered the office. "I came here to tell you that there are times when it is difficult for a lawyer to leave his office at the call of a little schoolgirl. I have a few moments before going to lunch. Where is the gold mine? I judged from your excitement that it was a gold mine, or was it diamonds?"

Hester was indifferent to his raillery. She was standing by the desk with her hands resting on the open file of papers. "Here, Mr. Hintner, please read this."

"Some of your own literary effusions, perhaps," he said, crossing the room to where she stood. "You must remember, Miss Hester Alden, that I am a lawyer merely, not a literary critic."

He bent forward to look at the paper. The instant his eyes fell upon the face of the woman and the man pictured there he grew interested. He reached to draw forward a chair. He seated himself and without a word to Hester read and reread the two columns. When satisfied that he understood what was written there, he took out a notebook and wrote the addresses which appeared in the account.

He forgot that Hester stood near waiting to hear his opinion. His mind was bent on getting the facts as they appeared in print. Then without a word to Hester, he got up and hurried into the private office. Mr. MacMurray was just about to leave, for it was now past noon and he had an engagement for lunch.

"Mac, there's a paper out here which I must have. It means a great deal in a case I have on hand."

"Can't break the files," was the reply.

"Copy all you wish, but the papers must not leave the office."

"This particular number means nothing to you, Mac. It's not one of your issues." He told him then that a mistake had been made in filing and that the *Record* file contained a copy of a *Record* issued from one of the cities in the middle west.

"If that's the case you may take it, but I must see to it myself." Mr. MacMurray came into the general office and looked over the file.

"That's a piece of careless work," he said. "This must be taken out." He slipped the odd issue from the filing clasp. "You can take it along if it's any use to you."

"It is," said Mr. Hintner. He took the paper, folded it into a convenient size, and slipped it into an inner pocket. "If you're going home, Mac, I'll drive you down. My car and man are at the door."

Mac accepted and the two men went their way. Hester stood looking after them. Mr. Hintner had not even thanked her for finding the paper and calling his attention to it. For an instant she was hurt. Before he had called,

she had been quite buoyant in spirits. Now, the mercury had gone down. Hester was a wise young girl after all. She considered a moment and then said, "I'm very silly to let any one make me miserable. I'm very glad I found what I did. I'm glad for Aunt Debby's sake and I do not care whether Mr. Hintner thanked me or not."

To the casual reader the newspaper article which Hester had found was of little interest. It was dated from Hamilton, a small city on the northern border of Lake Michigan. The paper was more than three years old. The town was named from a family of that name who were the original settlers. They had taken up large tracts of farm land, and were land rich. Twenty-five years before, the only son, Dick Hamilton, had gone into the southwest to try his luck in the silver mines. He had taken a large amount of money with him with the idea of buying an interest in mining companies. All trace of him had been lost. His family gave him up as dead. In the meantime, the middle west was building up rapidly. Railroads were

increasing and manufactories were springing up everywhere. Iron ore was discovered in the northern peninsula of Michigan. The Hamilton family owned great tracts of the iron-ore land. At this point a woman and young girl appeared as the wife and daughter of Dick Hamilton. The claimant had all manner of papers to prove her right. A settlement was about to be made in her favor when a flaw was found. The settlement was delayed for a time. The woman, feeling that she was suspected, disappeared with her daughter. The Hamilton family later found that she was an impostor and was working in company with a lawyer in their city who was really her husband.

So far the account was interesting reading because of the similarity between it and the Alden case. What made it vitally interesting to Hester was that the description and picture of the woman were those of her who called herself Mrs. Ezra Alden.

Hester hurried home to tell Debby Alden of the article in the paper. Debby had gone to much trouble to prepare for dinner such dishes

which Hester was particularly fond of, but Hester was so excited that she could not eat, but talked fast and with a show of excitement.

"Hester," said Debby after a few moments, during which the girl's tongue had not ceased, "Hester, you have permitted yourself to become greatly excited. Now, I shall not listen to another word until you have become calm and eaten your dinner. The breaded veal is particularly nice and I made apple sauce expressly for you. Now, please keep quiet and eat slowly. After dinner, you may talk to your heart's content."

Hester forced herself to eat. She knew she would not be permitted to tell her story until she had made a pretense of eating. She had no appetite. The excitement of the morning had taken hunger with it. By mere exercise of will she ate a piece of breaded veal and disposed of a slice of bread and jelly, which Debby looked upon as a necessity in rearing children. Hester had not outgrown the bread and jelly age.

"Aunt Debby, I have really eaten my dinner. Please may I talk? If you knew all

I have to tell, you would not have permitted me to taste a bite until I had said the last word."

"That time would never come, Hester. You would never reach the last word. You've done very well as far as dinner is concerned. Now, proceed and ease your mind."

Hester needed no second invitation. She began at once and told Debby Alden all that had occurred that morning, and of Mr. Hintner's visit. She repeated the description which the paper had given and spoke of the picture.

Debby listened without a word. There was a stiffening of her back and her head was just a little higher than before, but otherwise she made no show of feeling. She knew Hester's excitable nature. It was not always wise to encourage Hester in her flights of imagination. Miss Debby assumed a calm and non-committal manner.

"It sounds very interesting, Hester, but newspaper photographs all look alike to me. The best of them are not good likenesses, and as to the description, that may be as some young reporter gave it. To my way of thinking, it

is barely possible that the same people would attempt such a scheme a second time; besides, the Alden estate is not a wealthy one. Half of it would not attract a set of tricksters. People who are guilty of such work would be on the lookout for more than you or I could give them."

That was a reasonable statement. Hester was nonplussed for the time. She had imagined a great many wonderful things since finding the newspaper. Now, she was brought down to plain facts.

"Mr. Hintner thought there was something in it," she said. "He was very much interested and took the paper off with him."

"Did he say that he thought it meant something to us? Did he say, Hester, that there was something in it?"

Hester hesitated before replying. She knew that her Aunt Debby had no sympathy from statements which were based on impressions. Miss Debby preferred facts to fiction.

"No, Aunt Debby, he did not say so; but why should he take the paper away if he did not think it worth while?"

"There may be many reasons. Man is not without natural curiosity."

Debby Alden dropped the subject from the conversation. Jane Orr had run in for a few moments to ask for a catalogue which Hester had brought from Dickinson Seminary. Jane had decided not to return to the High School. Her heart longed for Dickinson, she had told Miss Debby. The conversation at the table between aunt and niece turned on the coming schooldays, and for the time, the unsettled condition of the Alden finances were forgotten.

Mr. Hintner, however, had not put the subject from his mind. Before he returned to his office in the afternoon he had decided upon a course of action. He would bring the case to a head within a week and have it off his hands, and the results should all be in favor of his clients.

Upon entering his office, he sent at once for Amos Kelly. This man held a unique position with the firm of Hintner and Hendig. He was a molder in the iron shops. He knew no law as lawyers know it. His education was limited. He knew men, however. He was rarely de-

ceived. He read character as Mr. Hintner read books. He possessed the faculty of seeing matters in their true relation; he classed things correctly.

On more than one occasion he had come to the assistance of the lawyers. He enjoyed a trip of a few days, and the fee tendered him was really worth while.

Mr. Hintner told him only enough of the circumstances that he might not work blindly. "What you are to do, Amos, is to visit the town named in the article and find out concerning these people. If in your judgment they are the same people we are dealing with, you're to bring down some member of the Hamilton family and an officer who understood the situation there. This is Tuesday. You should have the matter settled one way or the other and be here Monday or before. Telegraph me when you leave there. Take a closed cab with your guests to the Holmes House and keep them out of sight until I talk with you."

There was a further talk concerning the financial part of the trip. Amos Kelly left that afternoon on the flyer for the north.

Saturday evening a message came to Mr. Hintner that Amos and his friends would arrive in town on the midnight train Sunday. That meant success. Mr. Hintner set about arranging the details for the final meeting.

He wrote to the firm of Miller and Woodin requesting that they send their representative to confer with him the following Tuesday. He also requested that they send with him all communications which had passed between the agents.

A letter to Conrad and Westerleigh was also dictated. It asked that one of the firm with their clients in the Alden vs. Alden case would confer with Hintner and Hendig at the latter's office Tuesday afternoon at three o'clock. The third person to be remembered was Miss Alden herself. She was to bring Hester with her, and was to be there promptly at quarter of three. This being accomplished, Mr. Hintner could do nothing more until Amos Kelly and his friends arrived. Further details of the case depended upon what news they could bring him.

Amos and his friends could verify the newspaper account. Mrs. Hamilton, a relative of the

Dick Hamilton whose name figured in the newspaper account, had volunteered to accompany Amos home and identify these people if it were possible. The Chief of Police of the town came also. He had been looking for these people for three years.

Mr. Hintner did not wish them to come to his office until he had arranged matters as he desired. He visited them at the hotel, and after a lengthy conference decided upon the details of the final meeting. Amos with his friends were to be at Mr. Hintner's office some time before three o'clock the following afternoon.

"It is very probable that these are the same people who annoyed us," Mrs. Hamilton said at the close of the interview. "At the time Dick Hamilton went west there were hundreds of other young men of good family and money who had left their homes to speculate or work in the silver and gold mines. A great number died there. It was an easy matter to find their families in the east. There were always letters and pictures left behind them. That is the way this woman learned of us. Dick died and left

papers and letters which had been sent from home."

"I do not doubt that this so-called Mrs. Ezra Alden secured her material in the same way. Ezra, she says, boarded with her mother when he first came to Silver City," was Mr. Hinter's reply.

"I shall have my friends call on you to-morrow at two o'clock," said Amos, as Mr. Hinter was about to withdraw. "I promise you that I shall keep them under cover until that time."

## CHAPTER XIII

ALTHOUGH Mr. Hintner had spoken encouragingly of the settlement of the Alden estate, Miss Debby was not so hopeful. She had decided some time before that Alice Harpster was really her brother's wife, and had Mr. Hintner not restrained her, she would have settled the matter at once, sharing equally the real estate and the household furnishings. Miss Debby had made a mental inventory of every article which belonged to the Aldens or Palmers. There were piles of bedclothes in the spare room. Debby touched these with loving fingers. The coverlets, as she called them, were of reds, greens, and purples in quaint old designs. Grandmother Alden had spun and carded the wool herself. She had made an outfit for every son and daughter, but eventually they had come into the possession of Debby's father. There were sheets of heavy linen

which the same hands had made ready for the loom, and weaved and bleached.

There were quilts of patchwork which Debby had seen her own mother patch and quilt. They were of many designs, and the patches told the history of the Alden family. There were scraps of the babies' first slips; the boys' little shirts, or the school frocks of the girls'. A patch or more for each year of their life until the wedding gown or grave robe was worn.

Debby Alden loved these, not for any material value in them, but for the sentiment that clung to them like the delicate fragrance of sweet grass. She saw in each stitch a mother's fingers and a mother's dreams and hopes. They were dear to her and, had she had her wish, she would have kept every one of them. Yet her sense of justice was stronger than sentiment. Had Ezra lived, half of all these would have been his. Half then belonged rightfully to his wife and daughter. Debby Alden pressed her lips together to keep back the tears. She had no tolerance for a creature governed only by the emotions. She would best show her love to her mother by being just. She put aside all

personal feeling in the matter and began a regular assortment of the wealth of the spare room.

She had divided the linen, piece by piece, into two piles which were almost identical in quantity and quality. She was about to begin on the coverlets when Hester came in with the note from Mr. Hintner. She read it and then slipped it into her belt without a word to Hester. There was no need for Hester to concern herself until the matter was settled.

Hester was so engrossed in her own affairs that she did not observe that Debby was anxious.

"It's stifling hot up here, Aunt Debby," she cried. "Come out and sit under the apple-tree. I've been talking with Jane. She came down purposely to walk home with me. She had such a lot to tell me. Do come, Auntie, and sit outside. Whatever possessed you to work at this to-day? Are you going to pack some away? I'll help you if you'll wait until it is cooler. Don't bother with dinner. Can't you and I take something to eat outside?"

While she chatted, Hester had drawn Debby outside the room and on down the broad old-

fashioned stairway. Debby had been so far in the past that she had forgotten the present.

"It is almost twelve o'clock," she said as her eyes fell on the hall clock. "I had no idea it was so late. Hester, I haven't the slightest sign of a dinner—not even a lunch. I'm sure that this is the first time in my life that this has happened. How mother would have been provoked at my doing such a thing. That's what always comes of letting one's wits go wool-gathering."

"I'll see to lunch, Aunt Debby. Let's have a picnic. You sit out there and I'll arrange the tray." Debby was in such a state of mind that she was only too glad to be alone and think. Without a word she obeyed Hester and went out to the shade of the sweet apple tree. She sat and looked at the house. She would not complain if she could retain that. She was born there and her father before her. Every room held memories which were sacred. All the members of her family except Ezra had been carried from the front door to be laid to rest. Every member of the family had been baptized in the "parlor" when the circuit rider made his

visits. The old bushes and trees. She remembered how Jim Baker and she used to pick the lilies-of-the-valley which overspread the corner near the road. Jim Baker always—Miss Debby aroused herself and shut up her memories like a trap-door, as she always did the instant her mind dwelt on rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed Jim Baker. She always blushed for herself whenever her fancy dwelt on him. She thought of the other schoolboys who had coasted and snowballed their way to school with her. She thought of them as a matter of course. Debby did not analyze her feelings to discover why she was provoked with herself whenever she thought of Jim Baker.

The note from Mr. Hintner had asked her to call with Hester at the office that afternoon. His letter ended ambiguously. “We might as well close up the matter at once.” That meant to cut in two her land, her home, and almost her heartstrings.

Within the house Hester was not looking for trouble or going more than half-way to meet it. She was as happy as a lark or a domesticated kitten. Indeed, she seemed more like the lat-

ter, for she purred a happy little song as she went about preparing the lunch. There was cold veal from yesterday's roast. She cut several thin slices of these and arranged them on a plate and stuck several bright spicy-stemmed nasturtiums between. It was quite artistic and she stepped aside and viewed it at a distance with a feeling of pride. She cut dainty sandwiches of bread and butter. There were strawberry preserves in a quaint old blue and gold dish. She put on the tray a glass of milk for herself. For Aunt Debby she made a cup of coffee.

She was pleased with the appearance of the tray and with herself for doing it. The rich blue of the china and the deep orange of the flowers was quite effective.

Hester had placed the tray on the kitchen table. She stepped back and studied it seriously for several seconds. "I don't see how it could look nicer," she decided. Taking it up, she carried it out to Aunt Debby who sat, concerned and anxious, under the shade of the sweet apple tree.

The sight of the blue china brought the

trouble back to Debby's mind. It was one of the things which belonged to the estate. As far back as Debby could remember, it had been kept in the corner cupboard with glass doors. The term, "china closet" was not given in the old days to such an article.

Debby raised her head proudly. She would not grieve over matters beyond her control, neither would she disappoint Hester in not partaking of the lunch. The Alden blood came to the front. Debby thrust her own troubles from her mind, smiled at Hester, and praised the effect of her efforts.

Then with the gayest manner possible, she ate the delicate sandwiches and laughed and chatted about Jane Orr's going to school.

When the lunch had been disposed of, Debby turned to Hester. "Mr. Hintner wrote me that you and I should call at his office this afternoon. You had better go and ask Mr. MacMurray to excuse you a few minutes after two o'clock. I shall call for you and we can see Mr. Hintner together."

"Then I had better go at once," cried Hes-

ter gayly. "I can finish what work I began this morning."

"Run along. I shall put away the dishes and change my frock." She was wearing a one-piece working-dress of pink gingham, the neck of which was turned in, displaying Debby's firm white throat. Hester was about to say that she thought the gingham was quite pretty and that its wearer looked sweet enough to go anywhere when an indefinable something in the woman's eyes restrained her. Debby was not in a mood for fine speeches.

Hester caught up her big flapping hat from where she had tossed it on the grass and started forth. An hour later Debby called for her and they went together to Mr. Hintner's office. During the walk there Debby Alden made a heroic effort to control herself and not give way to worry and despondency.

Hester kept up a running conversation. She had not asked why Mr. Hintner had sent for them. She was young enough and happy enough to believe that the future was all sunshine and roses. If Mr. Hintner wished to

see them it was because he had some good news to impart. That was Hester's mental attitude. Debby allowed her to chatter on without giving her a hint that in a few hours their home would no longer be theirs.

Debby found Mr. Hintner as light-hearted as Hester. She was just a little annoyed. She felt that he might have shown a little sympathy.

"Good afternoon, Miss Alden," he said directly. "I sent for you and all the other parties concerned. I concluded that the business might as well be ended now. No use in dragging it over months and months of time."

He drew forward chairs for her and Hester, but before they were seated he turned and introduced two other persons in the room. One was a dainty little woman of middle age. Hester looked at her closely. She wondered where she had heard the name Mrs. Russell Hamilton before. She had forgotten the old newspaper which she had found among the files. The other person was a Mr. Peter Hitchcock. He was a big, handsome man in a well-made

business suit of gray. His eyes were keen and penetrating. Hester felt herself trembling before him. Scarcely had this introduction been made when the office boy opened the door to admit two men. Hester's eyes opened wide. They were the two persons who had been with Jim Bates in the ravine and who had been discussing options and reports. One was a Mr. Woodin and the other his legal adviser, she learned.

"We are all here except the other people," said Mr. Hintner. "I appointed a late hour for them. I have discussed the matter thoroughly with you gentlemen, and you understand the position I am about to take. It is now about time for Conrad and Westerleigh to appear with their client. I'll ask you gentlemen and Mrs. Hamilton to pass into the inner office. Leave the door ajar, please. Listen all you wish."

"No need to tell me that," said Mr. Hitchcock. "I came here for that purpose." He arose and moved into the inner office. The fire-clay man and his attorney, with Mrs. Hamilton, followed. Debby Alden was dazed in

anticipation of what she felt she must go through. She barely grasped all that Mr. Hintner had said. When the others rose to leave the office, she was about to follow when Mr. Hintner addressed her.

"I wish you to remain here, Miss Alden. I know this is a trying position for you, but it will soon be over. I shall make it as easy for you as possible. I brought the matter to a head sooner than I had planned, because I knew you must be laboring at a disadvantage. All I wish you and Hester to do this afternoon is to sit and listen, unless I ask you a question. Do not pay any attention to what any one else asks, unless I repeat it to you."

To sit and listen. Surely, that seemed easy enough, but to Debby Alden it was torture. Hester, however, did not fully grasp the situation. She did not know to what all this tended, besides, she had that gift which can make of all things what it will. The office and Mr. Hintner and even Debby Alden passed from Hester's mind. She was picturing things as they would be a few years later when she would have won a reputation as a

novelist. She saw herself hurrying down the path at the Alden home, bearing her laurel wreath for Miss Debby's pleasure. The waiting-time was not tedious to her.

Mr. Hintner called his office boy and, handing him a note, requested him to find that person at the address and to deliver it into his own hands.

It was just a few minutes later that Mr. Conrad with his clients entered. The lawyer was thin and wiry, with keen black eyes. He was a witty man, always ready to tell a good joke or ready to listen. He was most companionable. The hours passed quickly in his company, albeit his dress was careless, his hands more or less grimy, and his nails in mourning. He came in cheerily with a nod and a bright word for all.

"Glad to see that you're showing good common sense, Horace," he said, "in settling this matter at once. No use of dragging it through the courts and wasting the whole estate in trying to save it. You're sensible."

"Compliment me at the end of the service," said Mr. Hintner, waving him to a seat. "I

wish to ask this lady client of yours a few questions with your permission."

"Certainly—certainly. We're not afraid of anything."

"When were you last at Silver City, Mrs. Alden?" he asked.

She gave the date without hesitation. She had evidently had it well fixed in her mind. It agreed with that fixed by the old dame with whom Mr. Hintner had talked while on his trip west.

"Your husband was with you on that trip? I have just returned from Silver City. The people told me you and your husband had come back to attend your mother's funeral. They could not remember your husband's name. I asked several if it was Alden, but they could not tell me. Mr. Alden was with you then?" He looked directly at her.

"Yes, he was," she said. Again she did not hesitate. Her manner was that of one who has right on her side and fears nothing. Her daughter, on the contrary, was most uneasy. She fidgeted in her chair and twisted her gloves nervously in her hands. Her eyes looked as

though she had been weeping, and her expression was that of one who would burst into tears at the slightest provocation.

Mr. Hintner was well-pleased with the woman's reply. Taking up a notebook, he turned the leaves. "I copied the inscription from your mother's tomb. I have here the date of her death. I have also that of Ezra Alden's. I do not ask you to trust my notes. I have a signed statement from a Justice of the Peace in Silver City who examined the stones." He passed the papers to Mr. Conrad. "You see Ezra Alden had been dead some time previous to the date when your client says he was with her at her mother's funeral."

Mrs. Alden was about to speak when Mr. Hintner silenced her by a gesture of his hand. "There is really no need to become alarmed. I would not say your case was worthless on such evidence as that." He leaned back in his chair and looked at Mrs. Alden with a half-quizzical, half-amused look, which was not at all that of the legal man of business.

"This claim of yours brings to my mind a similar one which was brought up some years

ago. This may seem a little off the line of business which I called you here to attend to, but it's interesting. It happened up in Michigan—”

Mrs. Alden gave a start. A frightened look came to her eyes, but she was reassured by Mr. Hintner's indifferent manner. He was telling the tale as though it had no bearing on this case whatever.

He continued. Each incident of the Hamilton affair was told in detail. He explained how the claimant had forged a marriage certificate, signing the name of a man long since dead. The witnesses were people who were in the scheme with her.

His listeners were moved differently by this recital. Debby Alden began to see through his purpose. Hester was filled with triumph. The paper which she had found was really worth while after all. Mr. Conrad was visibly bored. He enjoyed a story in its proper place, but he was a busy man, and an hour cut from his day meant much to him. He was annoyed that he had left his own office to confer with Mr. Hint-

ner. He would learn a lesson and hereafter let the other man do the coming.

Mrs. Alden sat upright in her chair. Her big hat drooped over a mass of yellow hair. Her hands in soiled white gloves were clasped rigidly in her lap. The only sign of nervousness she showed was in biting her under lip.

Mr. Hintner finished his story. Then turning his head in the direction of the private office, he requested Mrs. Hamilton and Mr. Hitchcock to step out. The instant they appeared in the doorway, the girl called Deborah began to shake with sobs.

"I told you, Mother. I begged you not to. I'm sick. Oh, I'm so sick of it all! Why can't we be decent like other people."

"Deborah!" said her mother sternly.

"That's not my name and you know it is not. Don't call me by it. It's stolen like everything else. I'm sick of it all. I never wanted to come here. Oh, I do wish I was dead! Why can't I die when it's only a shame to live?"

There was no acting with her. All control had been swept away. She was just a shame-

stricken, homeless young girl, who was heartsick with the things which had been forced into her life.

The tears sprang to Debby Alden's eyes. Crossing the room, she knelt beside the girl's chair and put her arms about the crushed figure.

"There, there. Everything is coming right. No one blames you. We're just sorry, that's all. You had nothing to do with it."

"When I saw your home, Miss Alden, I did want—Oh, how I did want to live in a place like that. I've never had a real home. Yours was so lovely and big and homelike, and your girl was happy."

She shook with sobs and tears were on her cheeks. While Debby Alden sought to comfort her, Mr. Hintner was continuing the work in hand.

Mr. Conrad had lost his bored expression. He had had faith in his client and believed that she was the widow of Ezra Alden. He had no intention of assisting her now when her daughter's words had proven her an impostor.

Mrs. Hamilton stood in the doorway. Mr. Hintner turned to her. "Will you be kind

enough to look at this woman, Mrs. Hamilton, and tell me if you have ever seen her before and under what circumstances?"

Mrs. Hamilton moved forward and looked directly into the face of her who called herself Mrs. Alden. Then she said, "I saw her three years ago in Hamilton. She was there for some months. I talked with her a number of times and saw her frequently in public. She told me there that she was Mrs. Richard Hamilton, the widow of my husband's brother."

"You would swear to the statements you have just made, Mrs. Hamilton?"

"Most assuredly; any time it is asked of me," she replied.

"And you, Mr. Hitchcock?" asked Mr. Hintner. The big man moved lazily forward. His manner suggested that there was plenty of time and that no one need hurry.

"I'm very glad to meet the lady," he said with a bow in the direction of Alice Harpster. "I have been coveting that pleasure for three years. Indeed, I've traveled almost a thousand miles to meet her. The people up in Hamilton have asked me to bring her back with me."

Mr. Conrad groaned aloud. "How did you discover this, Hintner? I confess you misled me. I came here under the impression that there was to be a 'divy' of property. I'll tell you one thing, I was misled from the beginning. I believed the case was O. K. or I wouldn't have meddled with it. You'll believe it, Miss Alden?"

"Yes, I do," said Debby.

Mr. Hintner turned to him with a similar assurance. While this had been going on Alice Harpster sat upright, defiant, indifferent, but not conquered. She was like an animal at bay. Nothing she would say could alter the facts against her, but she could maintain a stolid, defiant silence and she did that.

Mr. Hitchcock had barely finished speaking when the office boy appeared at the doorway.

"The gentleman you wished to see is here, sir," he said.

"He arrived upon the wish," said Mr. Hintner. "Show him in, Henry."

Henry immediately flung wide the door and Mr. Bates stepped within. He looked about him, his glance moving from Alice Harpster

around the circle until it fell upon the man, Hitchcock. Then he stepped backward and would have left the room, had not Mr. Conrad stepped between him and the door.

"I don't know what is wanted of you, Bates," he said, "but I'll see to it that you stay a while."

"Be seated, Mr. Bates," said Mr. Hintner, with a characteristic movement of his hand toward a chair. "I sent for you concerning that business with Miller and Woodin. What offer did they make you for the clay rights on the land?"

"Since you know so much, find out the rest for yourself," retorted Bates.

"That's what I am trying to do," said Mr. Hintner good-naturedly. He could afford to laugh now. The affair was in his hands. There was no danger of losing anything. "Since you will not give me the information, I must get it from the other party to the transaction." He raised his voice slightly, "Mr. Woodin, if you would be kind enough."

"Only too glad to serve you, I'm sure," said that gentleman, coming in from the private

office. He was genial, smiling, bland. When his eyes rested on the man Bates, he nodded pleasantly. "How are you, Bates? Hot weather we're having."

It was hot for Bates, if for no one else. At the sight of Mr. Woodin, great drops of sweat stood on his forehead. He had been standing, but now he sank into a chair as though from exhaustion. The woman turned a withering glance of contempt upon him for his show of weakness.

"If you have no objections, Mr. Woodin, will you tell us of the option given to you on clay lands for which Mr. Bates was acting as agent?"

Bates held up a hand to restrain him. "What's the use of carrying the thing further? I'm not a cat to lap up milk that's been spilled. The game's up. I confess to it. Why carry the thing further and make it melodramatic? It's all a farce." He turned to the woman who sat erect in her chair. "Well, Alice, it does seem that you can't be a rich man's widow, so you'll have to content yourself with being Jim Bates's wife." He had not observed his

daughter, who was leaning against Debby Alden. When he did so, his face softened. "Poor little girl," he said. "I'm sorry for you. I wish this thing had turned out right for your sake. I'm sorry, little one, I'm sorry."

"I knew you would be," she said. She left Debby's side and went to her father, clinging close to him. "I know you're sorry. You've been sorry all along, but somehow you couldn't help it. You know you always did mean well, but you always did what other people told you to."

She slipped down on her knees beside him. Her head rested against his arm, and he patted it tenderly and smoothed the tangled mass with loving hands. Both were indifferent or had forgotten the presence of the others. They were only a heart-broken little girl and a repentant and grief-stricken father trying to console each other.

The eyes of every man there filled with tears. Big Peter Hitchcock turned his back and walked to the window where he stood staring and blinking up at a blank wall opposite him.

After a few minutes he turned and faced Jim

Bates. "Well, Jim, what's to be done about it?"

"The only thing that can be done. I suppose you want me for that Hamilton affair. It's a case of fraud, nothing more. I suppose I can get bail?"

"But you've got to go there to get it," said the officer.

"It is as you say. I'm in the hands of my friends." He spoke lightly. Then he looked down at his daughter. "But the little girl, Pete! What about her? She had nothing to do with it. We just forced her to keep her mouth shut."

"I'll stay here. I won't go back there and meet the girls I know and were my friends. I'll work and take care of myself. I'll do something; it will be honest, though. I'm sick of hiding and skulking about. I can work. I'll be a servant. I'll wash for people; I'll do anything but go through with this again."

She sobbed hysterically and clung to her father and he soothed her as best he could.

Debby Alden, high-bred, immaculate in white linen, standing as erect and dignified as became

one who had blue blood and blue blood only in her veins, looked on in silence. From the depth of her soul she despised deceit, intrigue, and lies. She loathed the people who were capable of them. She looked on for a while, then she spoke. “The girl of course cannot go with her parents. They are criminals and the law will consider them such. She can be with me for a time. The old house has always had room for one more, and the Aldens have never turned a needy stranger from their doors. I’ll keep her until she finds some suitable means of caring for herself.

“Come, bid your people good-by. You must come home with me now.”

“Yes, go with Miss Alden, Bess,” her father said, with an effort at self-control. He loosed her arms from about his neck and turned away that he might not see her leave.

## CHAPTER XIV

“I KNEW she would do just that thing,” said Mr. Hintner when Debby and Hester, with the stranger, had left the office. “From the hour that I knew how this affair was going to turn out, I felt sorry for the girl. One could see that she was not in the affair from choice. I used to study her face. It made my heart ache to see so much unhappiness in a young person. I was more concerned in her future than I was in saving the Alden estate. The latter I was sure of; the former was uncertain. Then I thought of Miss Debby. That is why I had her here this afternoon. I knew she would rise to the occasion. She’s economical and must know where every penny goes. She always has something laid by for a rainy day and she uses it when the rainy day comes, although it is always some one else’s rainy day rather than her own.”

Mr. Conrad nodded. Words had failed him.

The events of the last hour had been so unexpected and had come so suddenly upon him that he could do no more than nod his head to affirm or deny.

Mr. Hintner had not finished his interview with Jim Bates, but he did not wish Hester and Debby to hear the discussion. There was no reason why the old subject concerning Hester's family should be brought up in their hearing; yet Mr. Hintner himself wished to be satisfied in regard to the conversation which Hester had overheard in the train three months before.

"What about this Rose Walton and Phil Williams you and your friend were talking about?" was the question which Mr. Hintner put directly to him.

Jim laughed. He made no pretense of keeping anything back. "There were two courses we might work out. We had learned how this aunt cared for the adopted girl. We were going to prove Phil was her father. Miss Alden, if she felt sure, would buy Phil off at his own price. We intended working that if the other matter didn't come to a head, or if Miss Alden discovered the value of the land

which she always considered worthless." He paused a moment. "Then there was a reward offered for any knowledge of the whereabouts of a colored woman and a little white baby. We came quite by accident across it in a paper. The woman's name was Rosa Williams. The paper was sixteen or seventeen years old, but we found that the people who had offered the reward were living at the same place they were then and they had never found their child. This girl, that Miss Alden has, is about the same age and she didn't look unlike the people who put in the advertisement. Phil meant to claim her and then later communicate with these people."

He laughed again. "It was a nicely planned scheme," he said. "The only trouble was that it couldn't be worked."

Mr. Hintner looked at him in surprise. The man had shown feeling at the distress of his daughter. Now he was indifferent. He lacked all moral sense. He felt little shame at the prospects which were before him. He was without stability even in wrong-doing. His wife, who had the will and determination of half

a dozen men, looked at him in contempt. She had not moved or said a word since she knew herself to be trapped.

Debby Alden had returned home in a joyous state of mind, although she had taken a great responsibility upon her shoulders.

The new girl, Elizabeth Bates, had not spoken until they entered the house. Then her eyes filled with tears. She sat and looked about the living-room, fragrant with the atmosphere of home. When she caught Miss Debby's eyes upon her, she said simply, "It seems like heaven. You know I never had a real home."

After the evening meal was over, Hester turned to Debby. "Auntie, I promised to help you with your work in the guest chamber. It is cool now. Do you wish to finish the work?"

"No, Hester, that work need not be done," she said. There was a joyous note in her voice and her face wore an expression that was new to her. It was as though her spirit celebrated a day of thanksgiving, content, upliftment.

So the affair was settled nicely before Helen Loraine came down on the flyer Thursday afternoon. Jane and Hester went to meet her.

Mary Bowerman had been invited but had refused.

"I'm not going to run after her and make a lot of her just because she's rich."

"We do not wish you to do it for that reason," said Jane. "We don't wish you to run after her at all. We want you to be kind and agreeable, that's all."

At this Kate Bowerman spoke in her sharp, sarcastic way, "Mary will do as she pleases about it. I was never one for picking up strangers and making a great deal of them. Home folks are good enough for me."

Hester and Jane went their way. Helen was delighted to see her room-mate.

"I've heard so much of you, Jane," she said. "Hester was always quoting you. I confess I was almost afraid to meet you, I stand in awe of paragons, and after what Hester told me—"

"Hester's statements cannot be depended upon when she talks about her friends," laughed Jane. "As far as she is concerned, we have no faults. From what she told me of you, I expected to find wings nicely sprouted."

As the girls drew near the edge of town, Jane paused. "I must turn back. Mother warned me not to 'tag' this first day. You and Helen, so she says, might wish a few minutes alone to discuss school affairs."

Turn back she would, although both girls insisted that they would enjoy nothing as much as having her accompany them.

"I'll come to see you every day," Jane said at parting. "You'll have quite enough of me before your visit is over. I'm going to find out if you are really as nice as Hester declares you to be, or if you have deceived her woefully."

As Jane left them, Hester turned to her companion. "I wish you to do something for me, Helen. I wish you to keep a secret."

"It depends. The very fact that it is a secret may make me wish to tell it. I'll make an effort though, Hester dear. What is it?"

"Do not mention Dr. Baker's name to Aunt Debby."

"But he is coming Saturday afternoon. He came to the station to tell me that he would call at the Alden home Saturday evening. I'll be

compelled to mention his name. I must tell your Aunt Debby that he is coming. It would be discourteous not to."

"She'll forgive you—later," replied Hester. "Tell her that you expect a caller—but do not mention his name. And Helen, support me strongly when I suggest she wear her new white mull and put some pink sweet peas in her hair. She's the prettiest thing I ever saw when she dresses so."

"Surely I'll do what I can for the mull and sweet peas, but I can not understand why you object to Dr. Baker. He's a very fine gentleman."

"I know it. The finer he is, the better pleased I shall be." Then Hester laughed and, looking directly into her companion's eyes, asked, "Oh, Helen, can't you see through a ladder?"

"Not unless it is a very open one." Suddenly light came to her. She paused and laying her hand on Hester's arm said, "You do not mean—It isn't possible—"

Hester nodded her head. "I'm not sure. I'm just suspicious. I may not tell you why I think so, Helen. Just accept my suspicions."

"I'll be glad to. How perfectly lovely if we would bring about their meeting!" Then the two fell to planning how to finish the work which Cupid had left incomplete twenty years before.

The days were only too short. Debby Alden with the true spirit of hospitality tried not to entertain Helen as she was accustomed to live at home, but after the fashion of the Alden household.

"Helen would enjoy boating and a mountain climb," Debby suggested to Hester.

"She'd love to go to the State Reservation. I'll ask Jane to go along."

"And Mary Bowerman," called Debby.

"She's always fussing and quarreling so that it's really no pleasure, Aunt Debby."

"It does not matter. She's your next-door neighbor and you have always been friendly with her. You must ask her."

The climb to State Camp was arranged for Saturday morning. Friday evening Hester slipped across the lots to the Bowerman home. She was issuing the invitation on compulsion and was not well-pleased about it.

"We are going to State Camp to-morrow morning, Mary. We'll start at six o'clock and take a lunch with us. Can you go along?"

"I can if I wish to," was the reply given with a toss of the head.

"But do you wish to?"

"I cannot say that I am particularly anxious. I don't like a lot of sweetness boiled down, like you say Helen Loraine is. I may go. If I do, I'll come over at six o'clock and be ready to start with you. I'll think it over and decide whether I wish to go or not."

"Don't bother thinking anything about it." Hester had almost lost control of her temper. "If there's the least doubt in your mind, do not go. We'll try to be happy without you. If you are going to have one of your disagreeable spells I'd much rather you would stay at home. You spoil everything when you're in a bad humor." Hester held her head up and left the house as quickly as her feet could carry her.

She said nothing to her Aunt Debby of what had occurred. To Debby's questions as to whether or not she had invited Mary, she re-

sponded with a single "Yes," and began at once to talk of something else.

Jane, Ralph, Helen, and Hester made up the party Saturday morning. It was not six o'clock when they started. There was a continuous climb up almost perpendicular heights for two hours when the broad table-land was reached. Here they had lunch and after resting, began the descent. It was late in the afternoon when the Alden home came in sight.

There were letters for Helen. After reading them, she addressed Debby, "Miss Alden, I expect a friend to call this evening at eight o'clock, if you do not object. I should like you to meet him. I am sure you will like him."

"I am sure I will if he is a friend of yours. I shall be glad to have him call."

"Put on your new white dress," cried Hester, trying her best to speak as though the idea had that minute popped into her head. "I want Helen's friend to see how beautiful you are."

"How vain you have made me," responded Debby, laughing softly. "I am afraid your young men callers will not know what I am

wearing. Their eyes will not be in my direction."

"But you will look your sweetest—for my sake." Helen came from her place at the tea-table and bent over Debby's chair. "I wish you would wear the pretty little gown you had ready for commencement and put a few sweet peas in your hair. You'll look like a picture, Miss Debby."

"Such flattery would make me do anything. I am as wax in the hands of you two girls. You should blush at your attempts to turn a middle-aged woman into a giddy young girl."

"We're not attempting that at all," said Helen. "We wish only to have a fine frame for our beautiful picture."

The two girls were unusually enthusiastic. After the supper work had been cleared away they bore Debby off to make her toilet. Helen went into the garden to pick the flowers and returned shortly with a bunch of sweet peas of the most delicate pink.

The doors between the bedrooms were open and conversation was carried on while the three were dressing.

Helen and Hester had put on white linen shirt-waist suits. Debby looked at them in surprise. "I thought you intended putting on your best bib and tucker."

"I thought I'd save my fine dress for church," said Hester.

"There's so many buttons on my organdie that it's a task to get into it," responded Helen. Then the girls looked at each other with twinkling eyes. There was something in the air. Miss Debby felt conscious of something—she knew not what.

She looked like a beautiful picture in her soft white gown with sleeves to the elbow and the throat bare. Helen had stuck the flowers in her hair at just the right angle to cast a bit of color over Debby's cheeks.

The three sat in the living-room waiting. Debby made an effort at conversation, but the minds of the girls were elsewhere. They glanced frequently at the clock. At a quarter of eight Hester arose. "I'll run over and telephone to Jane Orr about dinner to-morrow."

"I'll go with you. I need a walk." Helen was already at the door. It was hardly possi-

ble that she was suffering from lack of exercise, for the mountain climb had involved a dozen miles.

"But your caller will be here, Helen."

"You entertain him until I return, Miss Debby. I'll be back before he tires you."

"You did not tell me his name. I shall not know what to call him."

Helen hurriedly closed the door after her and presumably did not hear this last remark of Miss Debby's.

Once out of sight, Hester clutched Helen's arm. "That was quite a brilliant remark about your returning before the caller would tire her."

"If they once were friends, they'll forget all about us."

"He'll come this way from town. I wonder if he'll drive."

"No, he believes in walking. If Miss Debby is his old sweetheart, he'll want to walk along here and bring back all the old days."

"Let us sit here. He'll not see us." Hester pushed aside the foliage which hung like a curtain before a footpath. The girls entered and found seats on an uprooted tree. They sat

facing the road so that they might see who would pass. They had not many minutes to wait until footsteps were heard.

"That is he," whispered Helen, as a fine-looking, dignified gentleman appeared. They had good opportunity to study him, for he walked slowly and with his head down as though in deep thought.

"The symptoms are favorable," whispered Helen. "He usually walks briskly and with head erect."

"Let us walk down to Jane's and ask her to come to dinner. I never did like to telephone."

"Nor do I—at present. We'll walk slowly, and pause to look at everything we see. I should not be surprised if it took us two hours to go there and back."

"That's just the way I feel," laughed Hester. "There are times when I like a quiet, slow walk, suggestive of a snail."

In spite of their loitering, little more than an hour had passed when they returned. They paused at the threshold of the living-room and then entered.

Debby was sitting in an easy chair by the

window. Doctor Baker was standing beside her. Debby needed no sweet peas to bring color to her cheeks. Her eyes were like stars. She arose to meet the girls. Putting her arms about both, she drew them close to her. "You dear little plotters!" she said. "And to think I never suspected you."

## CHAPTER XV

THE following afternoon Miss Alden had callers. Mr. Woodin, of the firm of Miller and Woodin, fire-brick manufacturers, accompanied by his legal adviser, called to tell Debby that they were ready to carry out their part of the contract which had been a verbal one with Jim Bates, who had represented himself as Mrs. Alden's agent.

Debby had not grasped the import of Mr. Hintner's words of the day before. She had been interested in comforting the girl. It did not occur to her that the business between Jim Bates and the brick company had any connection with her. She listened quietly while the situation was explained to her. It was like a fairytale. She could not grasp it. There in the ravine and in the hills beyond lay a fortune; great veins of the finest fire-clay in the world covered over by a few inches of soil.

“This has come upon me suddenly,” said

Debby Alden. "I cannot decide. I must have time to think. I will talk with Mr. Hintner and he will communicate with you."

The conversation had taken place as they sat under the old sweet apple-tree. Debby stood watching the carriage far down the road until it disappeared over the top of the hill. How much sorrow and joy had come and gone for her by way of that road. Hester had—

As though her thoughts had power to call her, Hester at that instant slipped beneath Debby's arm and drew it about her shoulder. It was Hester who had given Mr. Hintner the clew. This thought came suddenly to Debby Alden. She had been repaid a hundredfold for the love she had shown to the motherless stranger child.

"It was your paper that settled the matter, Hester," she said.

"I know. I'm very glad." Her face grew mischievous. She said teasingly, "I'm very glad that I can say, 'I told you so.' "

Debby never kept good news from Hester. The young girl was niece, confidante, friend.

"They have offered me one hundred thou-

sand dollars just for the clay on the hill and ravine."

"One hundred thousand!" exclaimed Hester, awed by the thought of it.

"I think we can manage to live on that," said Debby dryly. "But we must be economical, very economical, Hester."

"But you forgot my money," exclaimed Hester. "You forgot that I have fifty-four dollars in the bank. My wealth did not come by chance." She tried to look saucy. "Mine came through effort. Mine was the result of wage-earning."

The good news flew. Before a week had passed every one about town knew that Jim Baker and Debby Alden had made up. Kate Bowerman came over to have Debby herself verify the report. She added a few sarcastic touches. "Well, I do hope you're marrying well, Deb," she said. "You've waited long enough, goodness knows."

Debby laughed. She was too happy and had a life too full of good things to be touched by Kate's show of venom.

Mary had accompanied her mother, and sat with Helen and Hester in the shade of the old sweet apple-tree. Helen had brought down some fancy-work and was teaching Hester. As they worked, their conversation naturally turned toward the exciting news of the discovery of clay on the hillside.

Mary opened her eyes. She had not heard this before. "Do you mean to tell me that the hill and ravine are worth anything? Why, everybody says that potatoes couldn't be raised there. The soil is only a few inches deep."

"It's the clay under the thin layer which is valuable. The men have offered Aunt Debby one hundred thousand dollars for what is there. Auntie is—"

Just at that moment Debby came to the door. "Hester, could you go into town? I find I have no chocolate. You and Helen have both declared yourselves suffering for a devil's food cake. So if you really wish—"

"We surely do. In a moment, Aunt Debby." Disposing of her needlework, Hester went into the kitchen to see what purchases her Aunt Debby wished her to make. It was a radiant,



DEBBY ALDEN WAS DAY-DREAMING AS SHE BEAT HER EGGS.  
*Page 311.*



beautiful Miss Alden who stood whipping eggs by the kitchen door. She was wholly different from the woman who sixteen years before had directed the stranger on the way to town.

Before, she had been one who was merely existing, accepting as gospel all the worn-out and harmful traditions of the countryside. She was physically, mentally, and spiritually a finer, bigger woman now than she had been then.

She had made sacrifices in order to educate Hester and the sacrifice had reacted and she herself had been developed and cultivated.

Little pink-cheeked Jim Baker and she had loved each other all their lives. The cultivated Dr. Baker could not have found her, as she was fifteen years before, attractive. So in a round-about way, she attributed this new happiness to Hester, and the girl grew dearer than ever in her eyes.

Debby Alden was day-dreaming as she beat her eggs. Her reverie was broken in upon by Hester's "What shall I get in town for you, Aunt Debby?"

The list was ready. Hester took it and went her way, pausing long enough under the tree to

admonish the girls to save a little fudge until she returned.

Helen made a laughing rejoinder, but Mary sat silent. Her disagreeable mood was upon her. The envy within her heart had developed until she was miserably unhappy when fortune smiled upon another. Her eyes followed Hester until she turned the bend of the road.

"Some people are awfully lucky," she said, turning to Helen. "To think of such a thing happening to Hester."

"I am very glad," said Helen gently. "It always pleases me when good people have such fortune. Miss Debby will use her money wisely, I am sure; and many people will be better because she has it."

"Oh, I suppose so. I wasn't thinking of that." She spoke most ungraciously. "I was thinking of how lucky Hester was."

"Yes, I presume she is—in more ways than one." Helen felt Mary's unpleasant state of mind, but not knowing the cause, sought to present the subject in a different light. "I think she is very fortunate, just as any girl is who has a good home and is well-born and bred."

Money is only an accessory—not an essential. I consider any girl fortunate who has an aunt like Hester's Aunt Debby."

"Aunt! Fiddlesticks! I think, and every one else in the neighborhood thinks, that they do the 'Aunt' business to death. Aunt!"

There was a world of sarcasm in the voice of the speaker. Her tone rather than her words caused her companion to raise her eyes questioningly and pause in her work.

"Don't you know? I supposed of course you did. But then, Hester would not tell you, and you know no one else who knows her story. Hester's no relation at all. Her name never was Alden. She—"

Helen raised her hands to stop the torrent of gossip which was about to flow forth. But Mary had told much before she was conscious of Helen's displeasure.

"She's only a waif—the woman who had her was killed at the crossing."

Helen dropped her work. She forgot that she was listening to the family affairs of her hostess. All her high sense of honor seemed to float off into space upon the instant. She

leaned eagerly forward, "Yes, yes, how long ago?" she cried.

Mary was delighted at having found such an interested listener.

"Fifteen or sixteen years ago. I was just a baby. People thought Hester was just a year old. The woman stopped here for dinner. She said she was on her way to the station. Miss Debby forgot about the Buffalo flyer and told her to cross the tracks. She—"

Her listener had fled and was running toward the house as fast as feet could carry her. Rushing breathless into the kitchen and seizing Debby by the hand she cried, "Ask Mrs. Bowerman to excuse you and come with me into the living-room. I must talk with you!"

There was no resisting her. Debby was pulled into the adjoining room and the door closed behind her before she was able to gather her scattered wits. Helen stood bolt upright like a young goddess.

"Miss Debby, I must know. Isn't Hester your niece?"

"No; not really."

"Where did you get her—how long ago?"

"Her mother was killed," began Debby.

"Are you sure it was her mother?"

It was the first time the idea of the woman's not being Hester's mother had ever been presented to Debby's mind.

"I'm not sure. I—I don't really know. I just took it for granted. She might not have been."

"Do you remember how she looked?"

"Very clearly. She was rather stout, with big dark eyes and dark hair which was very curly and—" Debby hesitated. She felt as though she must tell of the dark marks on the woman's finger nails.

"I was always a little afraid that she was not—was not—" she paused. Then began nervously. "She had dark marks on her nails."

"Rosa—that was Rosa. Oh, dear Miss Debby, what an angel you have been to this family!" Seizing Miss Debby, Helen held her tight in affectionate embrace.

"I cannot understand—I—" began Miss Debby.

"I'll tell you later, only now send Mary Bowerman to telegraph to Mrs. Vail. Say that

Helen needs her badly and to come at once. Sign your name, 'Miss Debby.' Auntie will be here by to-morrow. Dear Aunt Harriet. She'll be so happy. Dear, dear, I cannot wait. Please send the telegram, Miss Debby. It is all right. I'll explain then."

Debby wrote as directed, and hurrying into the yard directed Mary to hasten into town and see that the message was sent.

Within an hour Mrs. Vail and Robert were reading together,

"Helen needs you badly. Come at once.

"DEBBY ALDEN."

"Sick," said Robert.

"Dying," said Mrs. Vail. "See about the trains and tickets. I'll have Jenkins see to the traveling-bags."

## CHAPTER XVI

MISS DEBBY, after hearing Helen's story, concluded that nothing had best be said to Hester, at least until Mrs. Vail came. They would plan that these two should meet without suspecting the possible ties between them.

It was a very simple little story as Helen told it. Seventeen years before Mr. and Mrs. Vail had gone south for the winter, taking with them their little baby Dorothy. When spring came and they were about to return home, Mr. Vail was stricken with fever in its worst form. Mrs. Vail had also been exposed to the infection. She could not leave her husband, and she feared to risk her baby's life by keeping it south during the extreme hot weather. There was only one course. It seemed feasible enough. It was to send Rosa Williams, the quadroon nurse, north with the child. Mrs. Vail had seen her aboard a through train and

had provided for the comfort of the nurse and child. By some mischance, no one could know, how or why, Rosa had left the train and, being easily confused, had boarded one moving on another line. She had found her mistake that day and had stopped to rest at Debby Alden's and was making her way home.

Helen and Debby made an effort at self-control, but they were not themselves. This was evident to Hester, who tried to understand.

"Your cake is burned black, Aunt Debby," she said, rushing into the kitchen and pulling a charred mass from the oven.

"I declare, I had forgotten all about it," was Debby's rejoinder. The midday lunch was a failure. Hester was hungry and could have eaten heartily had there been anything there to eat. Helen and Debby nibbled a few bites, tried to talk, and then lapsed into silence.

"Let us work at our embroidery after dinner, Helen," cried Hester. "I am so anxious to finish my shirt-waist. How proud I'd be to have one I worked all myself."

"I could not keep a needle in my hand to-day. See how my fingers tremble," said Helen,

holding up her hand. Her fingers were actually shaking.

At last Hester gave up all attempt to entertain her guest. Helen heard nothing that was said to her and answered "yes" and "no" at random.

"Aunt Debby, what is the matter with Helen?" Hester sought Miss Debby in the privacy of her own room. "She is not herself. Have I offended her? What can I do to entertain her?"

"Let her alone. She is concerned about family affairs. She expects Mrs. Vail and perhaps Robert to-morrow."

"I'm so glad. I never met Mrs. Vail, but I know she is lovely. I know Robert. He's the nicest boy. I never knew a boy I liked so well. I should think that Helen would be overjoyed at their coming."

"She is—if matters turn out well. It is simply a business trip. Mrs. Vail is not happy. Helen is concerned for her. Do not bother her to-day. Let matters slip along as they will."

The afternoon and evening were long to Hester. Debby and Helen could not be dragged

into conversation. Hester felt the unusual in the atmosphere and was so affected by it that she could not work.

Helen went to the station to meet her aunt and cousin. Mrs. Vail exclaimed when she saw the girl, "Dear Helen, you have caused me no end of anxiety. I was quite sure that you were ill—dying."

"You should not borrow trouble, Aunt Harriet," she responded with a laugh to hide her own nervousness. "I am as well as can be—and never happier in my life. The telegram said I needed you. I certainly do, but about pleasant matters—weddings and trousseaux and all sorts of gay times."

She knew her reply had misled Mrs. Vail. "You do not mean, Helen, that you—"

"I mean nothing more, you dear little Aunt. I shall not tell you another thing until several days pass, but keep your eyes open and see if it was not well that I sent for you."

"I see plainly that I am to be a fifth wheel," said Robert as he assisted his mother and cousin to the carriage. "I might as well take the next

train back home. I see that I have come on a wild goose chase."

"You horrid boy, to call your new relations wild geese. I'll assure you, Robert Vail, that when you meet the people who are about to become members of your family, you'll love them better than I do."

"Isn't that like a girl. '*Them.*' '*They.*' You seek to evade by using a plural pronoun. Why not plumb out with it and say 'him,' 'he'? You're shy, too shy, Helen."

She laughed. "I know what I wish to say. I will not say 'he' or 'him.' Nothing shall make me say it."

"Oh, the stubbornness of women!" Robert shook his head. "I have done what I could to make you pliable, easy, and all sorts of nice things, but I see I have failed. From this time I wash my hands of you."

Miss Debby met her guests at the door. In her sweet and gracious manner she made them welcome. Hester had been sent to take lunch with Jane Orr.

"Dinner will be ready as soon as your friends

have refreshed themselves from travel stains," said Debby.

A few minutes later they sat at the dinner-table. The conversation turned toward the experiences of the previous spring.

"I proved a runaway hostess," said Mrs. Vail. "Urgent business called me, otherwise I should have met you and your niece then."

"It is very odd that Auntie and Hester never met," said Helen. "It seems to have been decided by fate. Every time Aunt Harriet came to see me, Hester was somewhere else."

"You shall meet her to-day. I am sure you will love her. She has been all that the fondest aunt or—mother—could wish her to be. So honorable and truthful, cheerful, and unselfish, that—" Debby paused. Her throat filled. She could say no more. She knew that she was giving Hester up. It meant that much. No one would need her now, was the thought which came to her; but she paused. Doctor Baker—rosy-cheeked Jim Baker needed her. He told her so. She could not have stood it otherwise.

"He came back at just the right time," she

told herself. She felt that otherwise she could not have borne the loss of Hester.

They were leaving the table when Hester came in. Her hair was braided and caught up with scarlet ribbons. Debby's eyes fell upon her in affectionate pride. Hester paused at the threshold just an instant. "Why, it's Mrs. Vail," she said, and advanced. Mrs. Vail had instinctively moved forward. Her eyes were bright. Without a word she put her arms around Hester and kissed her. With the girl's hand in her own, she moved toward the living-room.

For a moment no one spoke. Debby was the first to master herself. "I wish you would all come with me to the guest chamber. I have some quaint old articles I wish Mrs. Vail to see. I am sure she will be interested."

"I am quite sure I shall," said Mrs. Vail. "I was quite overcome with the resemblance of your niece to mine. Do you fancy there might be some family connection between the Loraines and Aldens, Miss Debby?"

"No, I have the family history for genera-

tions. I'm sure the Loraines and Aldens are not related."

"It is strange how there could be such a striking resemblance."

"Every one mentioned it when we were at school. Strangers thought we were sisters."

"Twins, I suppose," cried Robert.

He and Hester kept up a running fire of talk as they followed Miss Debby and Mrs. Vail to the guest chamber.

"I do not know what the trouble is with Aunt Debby and Helen," whispered Hester. "To-day and yesterday, they have acted—well, 'peculiar' is the only word."

"Helen is in love. They always act queer when they are so."

"That solves it. Aunt is in love, too," laughed Hester.

Debby drew forth a low rocker for Mrs. Vail. "I have had some little articles packed away for sixteen years. I felt that you would appreciate them—you like dainty rolled hems and fine handwork. I am afraid the nainsook has become yellow with age. Robert, will you draw out the little old trunk in the closet?"



"DID YOU EVER SEE ANY DAINTIER WORK?"—Page 325.



"Most assuredly. This all savors of romance. I'll wager the trunk is packed with love-letters." He was pulling forth the trunk as he talked. "I am glad I came down. The very atmosphere of this house smells of orange blossoms. Got any faded flowers in this trunk, Miss Debby?"

"Nary a one, Robert. Put the trunk before your mother there. The girls have seen these treasures." Debby opened the lid, and getting on her knees took out the pins which fastened the papers about the little clothes which Hester had worn the day Rosa Williams had been killed.

"Look at this little petticoat and dress. Did you ever see any daintier work?" Debby laid the articles on Mrs. Vail's lap. "I've had them packed away for sixteen years."

There was an awful silence. Robert looked from one to the other. He knew now that Miss Debby had called them here for a purpose.

Mrs. Vail fingered the articles lovingly. "Did you make them? Whose were they? Once I worked a—" she could not finish. After a moment she controlled herself. "I could

readily believe they were the same. They are so alike."

"Who made them?" Debby was yet on her knees, but was close enough to lay her hand on Mrs. Vail's. "I do not know who made them —*you*, perhaps. Hester was wearing them when I found her sixteen years ago, by the railroad, a few minutes after her colored nurse had been killed."

"Was it not my mother?" cried Hester. "You told me, Aunt Debby, that it was my mother."

"So I thought. I know now that it was not. Mrs. Vail is your mother, Hester."

Mrs. Vail could say nothing at all. She could not grasp the meaning. She looked from one to the other, and then at the baby clothes in her hands.

Then like a flash it came to her—"My dear little daughter," she said, turning toward Hester and taking her close in her arms. The others were about to slip away when Mrs. Vail addressed Robert, "Telegraph your father that I've found our little girl. He has been patient so long."

It ended better than a fairy-tale. They lived happy ever afterward. Hester made her home with her real mother; but Aunt Debby and Doctor Baker were not a square away. So they were all united and happy. Elizabeth Bates had remained with Debby until the completion of a thorough high school course. She had from the first shown her gratitude by an affection that did much to console her good friend for the absence of Hester. She proved to be possessed of so high a degree of efficiency and good sense that when her age allowed her to begin specific training for the calling of a nurse she did so with every assurance that by bringing comfort to others she would do much to atone to the world for the trouble caused by her parents. Mrs. Vail could not be grateful enough to Debby for the care and love she gave to the little child, but Miss Debby knew that Hester brought to her all the best things of life —new youth, efficiency, and love.

THE END



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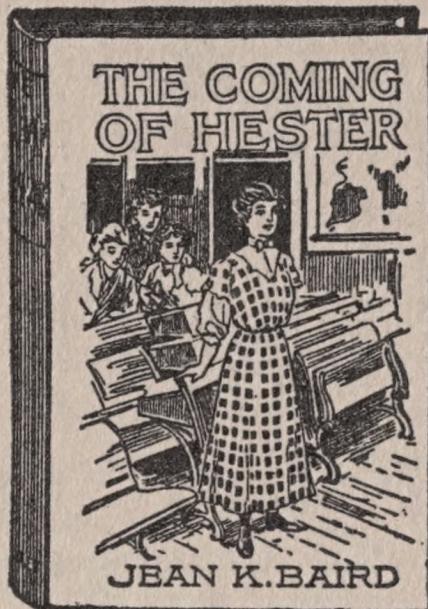
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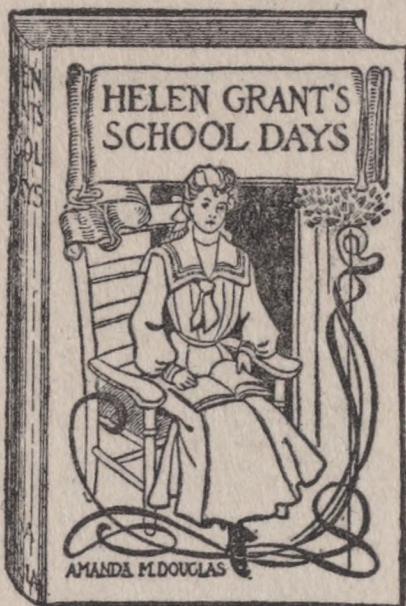
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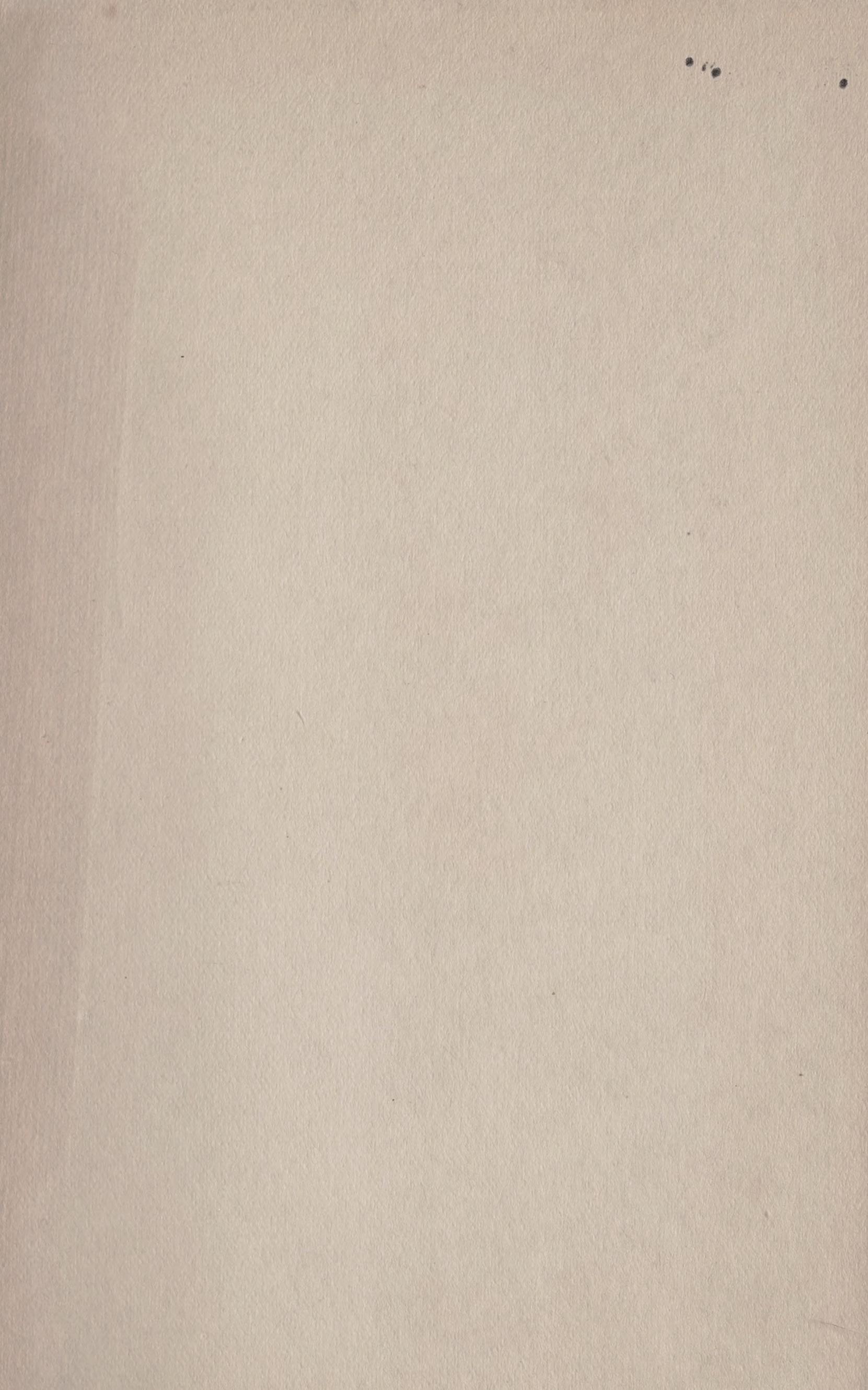
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